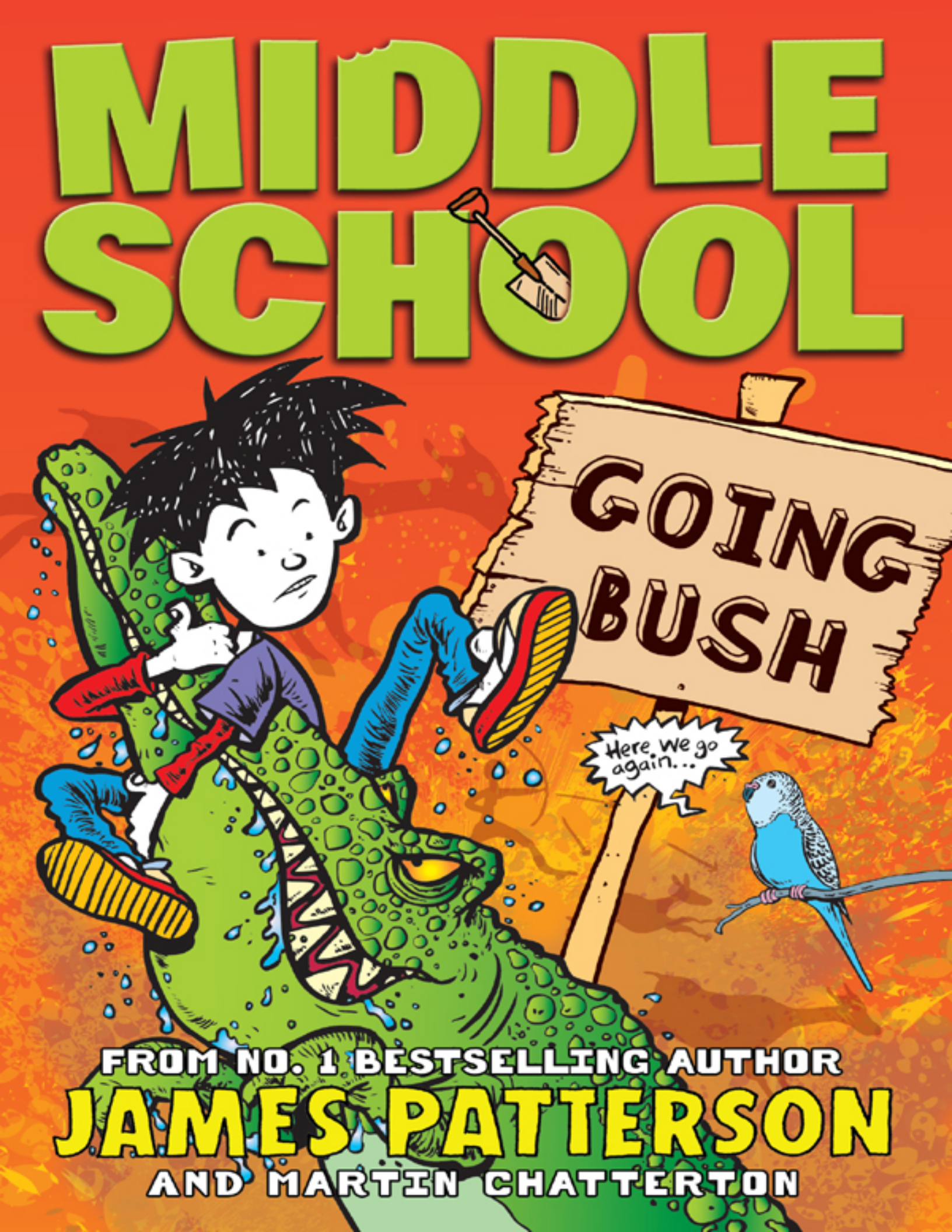
MIDDLE SCHOOL



FROM NO. 1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JAMES PATTERSON

AND MARTIN CHATTERTON

WORDS OF WISDOM FROM A MAN OF EXPERIENCE (THAT'S ME):

- Never wish for something interesting to happen
- Never share a room with a farty Brazilian
- Never forget how awesome it is to be on solid ground
- Never trust a bearded bushman
- Never EVER play fetch with a crocodile

Last time I went Down Under, things got pretty crazy. This time I'm much wiser and more mature—I'm *Rafe Khatchadorian*, *Young Artist*. Besides, the Aussie bush can't be any worse than the beach. Right?

HERE WE GO … AGAIN!

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About the Author

Also by James Patterson

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MIDDLE SCHOOL

JAMES PATTERSON

AND MARTIN CHATTERTON

RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

To Dr. Sophie Chatterton
—M.C.

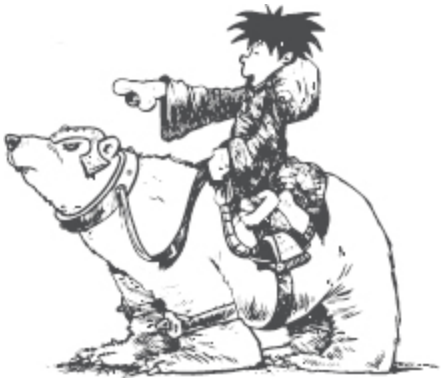
THE TROUBLE WITH FLYING POLAR BEARS

"TO THE FLAMING Fjords of Askabalant, Lorek Bearsson!" I settled into my saddle and pointed north. "Fly like the wind, old friend, and we'll be feasting on roasted reindeer and cloudberries by sundown!"

I tapped my boot heels against the flanks of the mighty flying warrior polar bear and tightened my grip on the sealskin reins.

The mighty flying warrior polar bear farted loudly and sat down.

That's the trouble with crummy flying warrior polar bears—they can be as stubborn as a mule wearing lead-lined boots.



I needed to get back to the fjords—MegaGlobal Pictures were making a movie about my amazingly fabulous life and I was due on set in less than twenty-four hours to film a scene with Brad Pitt. I mean, I couldn't let the Bradster down. There was only one thing for it—I whipped out my Mongolian hunting horn and blew.

In moments a dust cloud appeared containing a super-cool Mongolian wolf-hunter dude.

“Hey, super-cool wolf-hunter dude, I need to get back home! Brad Pitt is waiting!” I said.

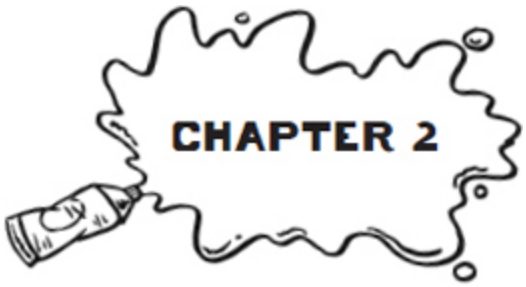
The super-cool wolf-hunter dude nodded wisely. “They say Brad Pitt waits for no man,” he said, handing me the reins to his spare horse. (Did I mention he had a spare?) He released the falcon. “Follow the Saker. He knows the fastest way back.”

“Thanks, wolf-hunter dude!” I yelled, just as a greasy wet cloth hit me smack in the face.

“Hey, lame-o, quit being such a dorky buttwad!” said a voice from lousy old reality. And just like that I was jerked—*blam!*—right out of my daydream.

Brad Pitt was going to be disappointed.

SPLAT!



DISHPIGS

MOST OF YOU will have guessed by now that I *wasn't* galloping across the Mongolian plains following a super-cool wolf-hunting falcon to the Flaming Fjords of Askabalant. Instead, I was somewhere a whole heap less interesting—the back kitchen at Swifty's Diner on the corner of Montgomery Boulevard in Hills Village, where I was working part-time to earn some spare cash.

I wasn’t too sure if I even *should* have been working—isn’t there, like, a law against that or something?—but since Mom knew Swifty, and I wasn’t exactly going down a coal mine, and I needed some money, she figured a few hours washing dishes wouldn’t hurt me none.

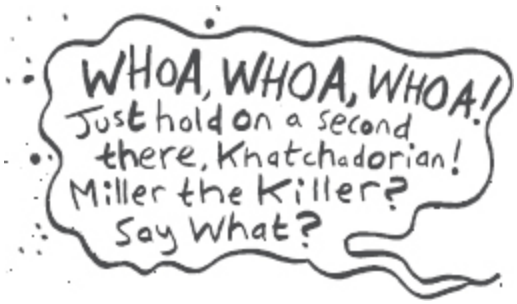
I didn’t mind too much. Mom was looking pretty happy these days what with Mr. Fanucci being on the scene and all, and she’d looked so pleased when she told me about the job at Swifty’s. I wasn’t about to spoil things by quitting.

Of course, that was *before* I found out who I had to work with. Once I knew, the coal mine option didn’t look half-bad.

“Yo, KhatchaDORKian,” Miller yelled. “Quit staring into space and start washing!”

I peeled the cloth off my face and looked at the skyscraper of filthy plates in front of me with not even a teeny-tiny speck of enthusiasm. I had so little enthusiasm that Sherlock Holmes* couldn't have found it using a spectron microscope fitted with a Schnell & Hammerstein nuclear-powered enthusiasm locator.**

I wanted to hurl. It was my job to scrape the goop off the plates so that Miller the Killer could dry and stack them. Maybe it wasn't the worst job in the world but—



Sorry, was I going too fast there? Yep, you heard me right: Miller the Killer, the brain-free knuckle-dragger who's dedicated his life to making mine a misery, the same Miller the Killer who never misses a chance to publicly humiliate me, the dude I exposed as a serial bully—*that's* the guy I'm best buds with at Swifty's.

Okay, let me explain two things:

There's nothing wrong with your hearing. I *did* say "Miller the Killer".

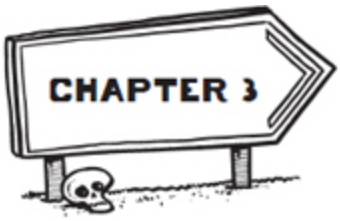
He and I definitely, absolutely, 100 percent are NOT best buds and will NEVER be best buds.

"You aren't on one of your fancy artist trips now, KhatchaDORKian," Miller the Killer said, a nasty grin plastered across his face. "You're back with the regular people."

I sighed, picked up a plate, and plunged it into the suds.

Miller was right. I wasn't on one of my art trips, I wasn't on a camp in Colorado, or at a ritzy art school, and I certainly wasn't riding a mighty flying warrior polar bear to meet Brad Pitt. I was back with the regular people again.

And it *sucked*.



TEN REASONS BEING WITH REGULAR PEOPLE IS OKAY

MAYBE I WENT too far. Being back with the “regular people” did have some advantages.

1. I got to see plenty of my mom and Grandma Dotty and Georgia (yes, I admit that, despite her being *incredibly* annoying *most* of the time, I do actually sorta, y’know, *like* my little sis).

2. I wasn’t being chased by Australian zombies. (That is a thing. It happened on one of my fancy art trips. Never underestimate how good it is NOT being chased by Australian zombies.)

3. I’d kissed Marley Grote. Correction: Marley Grote had kissed *me*. If she’d waited for me to kiss *her* we’d both be in rocking chairs on the porch of some old folks’ home before lips locked. I still thought Jeanne Galletta was completely, totally awesome (obviously), so this is kind of where I’m at on that whole boy/girl front:

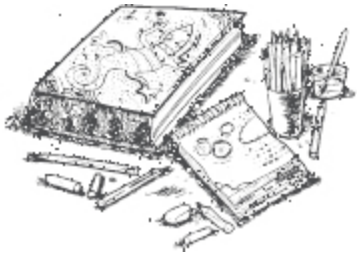
4. School was okay. There's no clever punchline here because, mostly, that's what school's like, right? Sort of somewhere between *okay* and *sucky*. Not amazing, not terrifying, just kind of in the middle. Hey, maybe that's why it's called middle school? Ha-ha-ha. I even had some school "cool cred" after (don't laugh) managing to get on the football team and ACTUALLY BEING KIND OF GOOD AT IT. I'd been cool for about eighteen seconds.

5. There were some advantages to working at Swifty's. I got to eat reduced-price burgers and sometimes Miller the Killer forgot to kick my butt.

6. Junior! Dogs make everything better. Everyone should have a dog. In case you haven't been keeping up with things (and if not, why not?), this is Junior. I know I'm biased and you probably think your dog is The Best Dog Of All Time but I'm here to tell you that you are just plain wrong. Junior is The Best Dog Of All Time, that's all there is to it.

7. Mom's still dating Mr. Fanucci, the Learning Skills teacher, which makes her happy, and if Mom's happy then I'm (usually) happy. Mr Fanucci's a big improvement on the geologist Mom dated when we were in Australia.

8. I was doing some seriously neat art. Ellie, my Australian friend, had sent me a book on traditional Indigenous Australian art for my birthday and I was filling my sketchbooks with a heap of new stuff. The Aboriginal paintings were all dots and lines and animals and I was trying out the ideas in the book. I hadn't shown them to anybody yet but I thought they were looking pretty good.



9. I'd retired Operation S.A.M., the undercover art activist, and I was making better choices about which Loozer comics I posted online—which meant I was getting an easier ride at school.

10. Last of all, I wasn't going to Learning Skills anymore. For those of you who missed it, after I got back from my Australian adventure, I did a spell in the Hills Village Middle School Learning Skills program. You can imagine how that felt, even if the kids in my class were kind of cool. Better still, grab a copy of the book (*Just My Rotten Luck*, available at all good bookstores and most lousy ones) and get yourselves back up to full Khatchadorian speed. Don't sweat it, I'll hang on until you're done.

Okay? All finished? Great stuff, hey? Did you like that part where I became President of the United States and invaded Pluto? You did? BUSTED! There *was* no part where I became President of the United States and invaded Pluto. Now, go back and read that book properly.

So, yeah. All in all, life in Hills Village with the regular people wasn't too bad.

But here's the kicker: if life among the regular people wasn't so bad, why did it feel like there was a great big something hovering just out of reach? Why did I keep checking my email for messages from "out there"? Why did I have itchy feet?

Why wasn't I happy?

YOU TOO CAN BECOME A MAN OF EXPERIENCE!

WHILE WALKING BACK home from Swifty’s, I racked my brain for ideas.

Maybe I wasn’t happy because I wasn’t famous or rich or better-looking or more successful with girls, or because I didn’t live in a big swanky house or play running back for the Miami Dolphins, or because I hadn’t discovered the cure for cancer. They’d all be good things, right? Well, yeah, obvs.

But while all of those things would probably make me happi*er*, I knew deep down that they weren’t the reason I wasn’t happy. Then, as I was passing Bob’s Tyre and Lube on the corner of Bloomington Avenue, the answer hit me like a lightning bolt.

I wasn’t happy because I was a teenager.

I'M JUST A TEENAGE HORMONE ZOMBIE!

IT WAS SO SIMPLE.

It explained everything.

"That's it!" I shouted. "I'm a teenager!"

"No kidding," said a guy in blue coveralls.

I ignored him and kept on walking. I felt like I'd discovered time travel or everlasting fuel. Here I was thinking it was something *I* was doing that was making me unhappy, when all this time it was those pesky hormones zipping around my body.

Hormones make life difficult.

Everyone says so. Hormones make us miserable. Hormones make us angry. Hormones make us unhappy. There was all that gross hair and growth spurts and voice-changing stuff too, but—and this was the neat bit—*none* of it was my fault. It was all down to hormones.

I felt a lot better knowing that I'd solved one of the mysteries of the universe … for about two minutes.

See, even though all that stuff about teenagers being unhappy was true, I knew that hormones weren't the entire reason I was feeling off.

The fact was, Miller the Killer was onto something.

I *was* back with the regular people.

It's not that I didn't like the regular people. I just wasn't the same Rafe Khatchadorian I was when I started writing all this down. Regular people seemed to have stayed the same while things—big, life-changing things—had happened *to* me.

I'd had experiences. I'd met artists, filmmakers, zombies (sort of), geologists … I'd even met Australians. I'd surfed, white-water rafted, camped in the wilds, been a secret art activist, accidentally blown up a toilet block, been written about in newspapers. I was A MAN OF EXPERIENCE!

Bottom line: I wasn't happy because I was right back where I'd started—in Hills Village. Back with Miller the Killer, back with Mom and Georgia and Grandma Dotty and Principal Stricker, Jeanne Galletta, and all the rest of them. And they were all just like they had been … but I wasn't.

I kicked a stone and hurt my big toe.

If only something *interesting* would happen.

THE GALACTIC FEDERATION OF BOREDOM

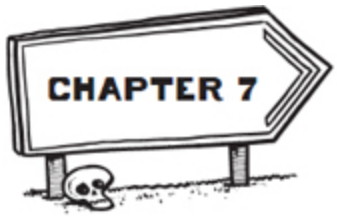
OUT IN DEEP space, a slim white rectangular craft glides silently past a swirling cloud of asteroids. The spaceship takes a couple of hits before a blue halo surrounds the Nuclear Velocity Operational—N.Vel.Ope for short—as the craft's protective amino-magnesia field is activated.

"A little quicker with that force field, Mr. Speck," Captain Kark's voice crackles over the radio. "We're carrying an important payload, and Emperor Khatchadorian would be most unhappy if anything were to happen."

"Affirmative, Captain," Speck replies. The Garolian navigator adjusts the controls and gazes intently at the three-dimensional radar in front of him.

"Take us past the shoulder of Orion," Kark says. "Hang a left at the C-beams of the Tannhauser Gate and put us on a collision course for Earth—Hills Village, USA, to be exact."

A passing Venusian mining probe scans the strange graphics on the N.Vel.Ope as it spins past. The words would mean nothing to a Venusian, but the contents of the cargo will be of great interest to Emperor Khatchadorian in his battle against The Galactic Federation of Boredom and its ally, Planet Ordinary …



PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

"HI, HONEY. Was work okay?" Mom asked when I came home. "Oh, I almost forgot—you've got a letter."

She was standing with her back to me, making pancakes, which filled the kitchen with the smell of, well, pancakes. Normally, I'd have snaffled as many of them as I could, but dealing with all those goopy plates kind of affects the appetite, if you know what I mean. I'd eat something later when I'd managed to forget all about The Sink At Swifty's Diner.

I planned to sneak my pancakes to Junior, who was sitting on my feet with his head on my knee. That dog always knows exactly where to sit.

Grandma Dotty was watching TV in the living room. She does a lot of that these days and sometimes talks to us about her favourite soap actors like they're real people. I've tried pointing this out, but now I just nod and agree with whatever she says.

There was no sign of Georgia. She was probably up in her room, arranging the world's biggest collection of stuffed animals. Georgia's got *a lot* of stuffed animals. Sometimes I think she'll go into her room and we'll just lose her in the crowd.

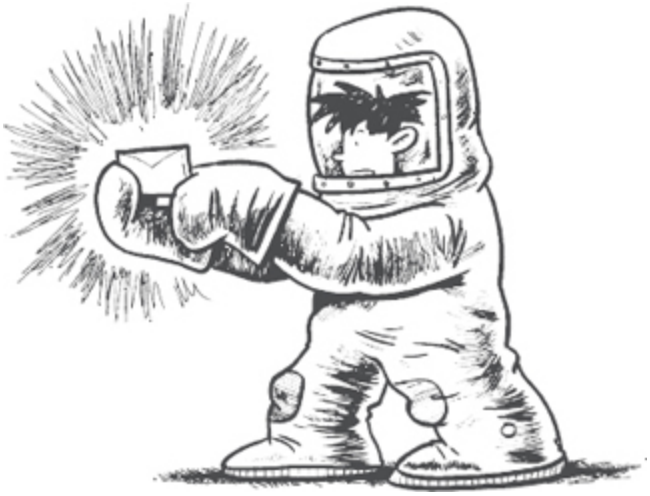
On the kitchen table was an envelope. It was propped up very suspiciously against a pot plant. I looked at it like it might explode. The envelope, I mean—not the pot plant.

Rafe Life Lesson #22: Envelopes propped up on the kitchen table should be approached with EXTREME CAUTION.

Suddenly, Mom having her back to me took on a new meaning.

Did she already know what was in the envelope? Were the pancakes to soften the blow of bad news? I wondered if Principal Stricker or her evil minion, Vice Principal Stonecase, had secretly signed me up for some fiendish punishment: deep-seam coalmining in Alaska, or cleaning the inside of a Ukrainian radioactive fuel dump using only my tongue.

I picked up the envelope.



It was nice, heavy paper—expensive. It looked official. It had some kind of stamp on it.

Mom turned around and waved the spatula at the envelope. “Are you going to open that or just stare at it?” she asked.

“No, I figured I’d stare at it some more,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Can’t I stare at things now? Jeez.”

Even when I’m saying sarcastic stuff like that it feels as if someone else is saying it. I know Mom doesn’t mean any harm. She’s not bad, but a teenager’s gotta do what a teenager’s gotta do. Sarcasm goes with the territory. Hormones, remember?

I waited for Mom to turn back to the pancakes and then opened the envelope. A smile spread slowly across my face.

Another chapter in The Adventures of Rafe Khatchadorian was about to begin.

THE LETTER

DEAR MR. KHATCHADORIAN,

Every four years the Institute for the Advancement of Writers and Contemporary American Artists in Washington (IAWCAAW) is asked to recommend a promising young artist to take part in an international educational arts program with other promising young artists from around the world. This year that arts program will begin on May 4 and takes the form of an all-expenses paid, two-week-long "Cultural Campout" situated in the Northern Territory of Australia. Your name was suggested to us for consideration by noted Australian art critic Mr. Frost DeAndrews. Therefore, we would like to invite you to take part as the American Young Artist. The other Young Artists who have accepted are listed overleaf. If you decide to accept our offer, please reply to …

I flipped the page and ran my eyes down the list of names on the back. One of them leapt out in red neon letters ten feet tall, and just like that, a crummy day that had become a pretty good day suddenly got a whole lot better.

CHAPTER 9

FLASHBACK TIME!

REMEMBER A FEW chapters back when I mentioned my Australian friend Ellie? Okay, if you haven't read *Rafe's Aussie Adventure*, you won't know that Ellie Watts is just about the coolest person I've ever met.

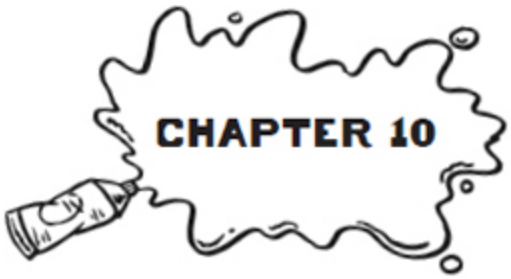
Ellie is awesome. She is smart, creative, and makes MOVIES! She also once saved me from a nude surfing disaster (long story).

Spoiler alert!

Even though things hadn't exactly worked out how we'd planned (because I'd ended up being chased out of Australia by a mob of angry

zombies), it wasn’t Ellie’s fault. Or Australia’s.

For a whole twenty-six seconds, I forgot all about Jeanne Galletta. I was going to see Ellie again.



UH-HUH, OH YEAH!

I PLAYED IT COOL.

"WOOOOOOOOOOOOHOOOOOOO!!!!!" I screamed, leaping to my feet.

"What on earth …?" Mom dropped the jug of pancake mix on the floor. I looked over and saw her face turning a dangerous shade of red.

But I didn't care. I punched the air and spun in a circle. "Khatchadorian shoots! He scores!" I shouted. "Goodbye, disgusting dishpig reality. Hello, awesome Australia!"

“Australia?” Mom said.

I held out the letter and danced around the room. “Uh-huh, uh-huh!”

“You look stupid,” Georgia said from the doorway.

I didn’t reply. Instead, I did what any normal teenage brother would do. I waggled my butt from side to side at her. Then I did that dance step thing where you push out your arms and sort of run on the spot while singing a sentence over and over again. In my case that was: “I’m going to Australia, I’m going to Australia.”

“Keep the noise down in there!” Grandma Dotty yelled. “They’re about to find out who the killer is!”

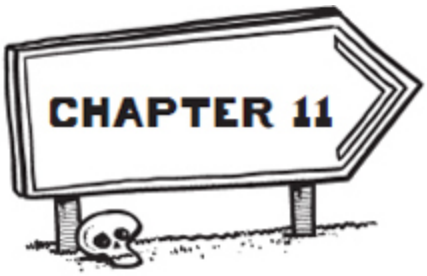
“The guy with the beard!” I yelled back. “It’s always the guy with the beard!”

Mom stepped over Junior and sat down at the kitchen table. “What about your schoolwork?” she said. “And Australia’s dangerous, Rafe, remember? You can’t just take off like that. I’m not sure you can go.”

“Ha-ha,” Georgia said.

I stopped dancing. Life had suddenly gotten all sucky again and this time hormones had nothing to do with it. My reunion with Ellie and

Australia had run headfirst into The Great Wall of Mom.



HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

WHAT DID SHE mean, I can't just take off like that?

OF COURSE I can just take off like that!

I'm *Rafe Khatchadorian, Young Artist*! I'd been specially invited! By an Institute! I was going to see Ellie! This wasn't fair! Mom wasn't fair! Life wasn't fair!

"You are just so—" I began, ready to tell Mom exactly how unfair she was being, when something really weird happened: I did something smart.

It was like there was a voice in my head telling me to *not* do the thing I was just about to do—that is, throw a complete full-on teenage tanty, stomp off to my room, and sulk for a couple of days.

That won't get you what you want, said the voice. *Be smart.*

The voice sounded like it knew what it was doing, like it was all wise and experienced and stuff. I wondered what it was doing in *my* head. Not only that, the voice had remembered the drawings I'd done. I couldn't believe my luck—if I knew anything about Mom, that sketchbook would be the clincher. I just had to pick the right moment.

"Just so what?" Mom said, her eyes narrowing.

"Just so *right*," I said.

"I am?" Mom said in shock. "Yes, I *am*! You can't just take time off. It's not good having too much time off school."

I nodded, making sure my face was set to SINCERE and laid the groundwork.

"What if I checked with Ms. Donatello?" I suggested. "The letter does say it's an educational program. I mean, she might agree with *you*, but there's always a chance she'll see if Mrs. Stricker will give me time off." I looked at the letter again. "I think half that time could be during school vacation, anyway. Plus, there'll be people looking after us, and Australia wasn't *that* dangerous."

Then I played my ace.

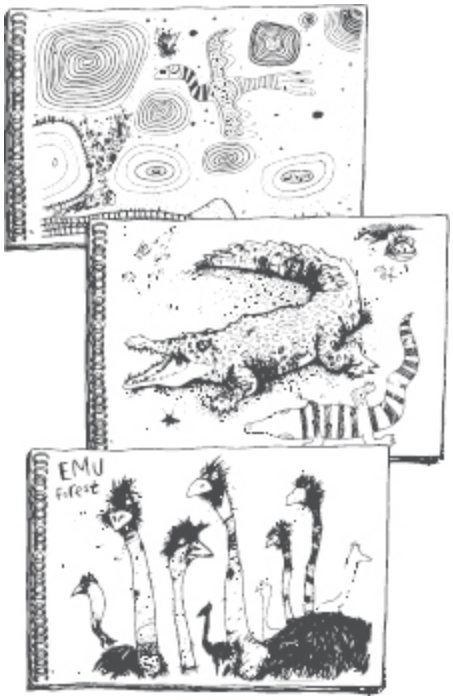
"Wait here," I said. "I'm going to show you something."

CHAPTER 12

THE CLINCHER

LEAVING MOM IN mid-think, I sprinted to my room and grabbed my big sketchbook. I clattered downstairs and stood next to her so she could see.

"I've been doing some drawings," I said, flicking through the pages until I found what I was looking for. "There," I said, pointing.



"Wow," Mom said, taking the sketchbook from me. "These are great, Rafe!"

Mom’s always loved my art, but for the first time I knew that she wasn’t just saying it because I was her kid. She was saying it because what I was doing was *good*. I could feel the difference.

I know I come off all ironic about stuff, but when it comes to art I am actually dead serious. I don’t want to sound all touchy-feely about it but this was what I was going to do for the rest of my life in one way or another. *I wanted to make art. This wasn’t just a hobby anymore.* I wanted to go to Australia for more than a free trip and to see Ellie. I wanted to go back and see some traditional Indigenous Australian art for myself.

“Thanks,” I said. “So …?”

Mom sucked in her cheeks. “I suppose there’s no harm in asking …”

“Hey!” Georgia said. “That’s not fair!”

I patted her on the head. She hates it when I do that, which is why I do it whenever I get the chance. “Fair’s a hair color, li’l sis,” I whispered, making sure Mom didn’t hear. “You’ll find out.”

“It *was* the guy with the beard!” Grandma Dotty shouted from the living room.

I nodded. It was always the guy with the beard.

I was so wise.

CHAPTER 13

DONATELLO DEATH MATCH

THAT MILITARY-LOOKING dude controlling my brain had been right to get me to quit bellyaching and try being smart.

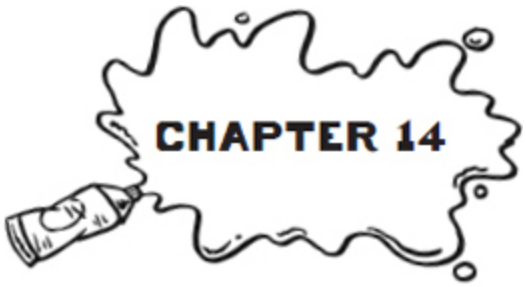
I showed Ms. Donatello the letter and she just about freaked—in a good way. She even gave me a hug (which I'm pretty sure is punishable by death in some states) and rushed off to do battle with the Fire-Breathing Dragon Lady who runs our school, aka Mrs. Stricker.

That was the moment when things sort of hung in the balance.

To say Mrs. Stricker doesn't like me would be akin to saying dogs don't like cats. Stricker flat out *hates* me. It would be a little bit of a miracle if Ms. Donatello came out of that office *alive*, let alone with permission for me to go back Down Under.

I hung around outside Stricker's lair for a year or two, chewing on my nails like they were prime BBQ ribs. Just when I started looking around for someone else's nails to chew, the door to the office opened and Ms. Donatello staggered out.

Whatever it was she had done inside there had worked. Principal Stricker had agreed to let me have the time off.



FAST FORWARD

THIS TIME *I* hugged Ms. Donatello.

"There are a couple of conditions, Rafe. Mrs. Stricker was very firm about this," Ms. Donatello said. "First, you have to write a detailed report about the whole thing when you get back."

I nodded. No problem. And define "detailed".

"You have to make sure you don't do anything dangerous," she added.

I nodded again. I had no plans to do anything dangerous. Doing things that are dangerous is *dangerous*.

"And you have to …"

I admit I kind of tuned out at that point. I mean, I really like Ms. Donatello and all, and I was *incredibly* grateful she'd gone into battle for me against the Dragon Lady, but I was so happy that I was getting to visit Australia again that I would've agreed to a head transplant without anaesthetic if that had been one of Mrs. Stricker's conditions.

Ms. Donatello eventually stopped listing all the stuff I was supposed to do or not do and I *blam*-med out of there and headed home.

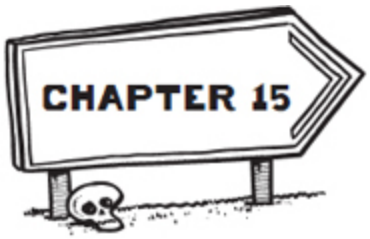
To be honest, I can't be bothered telling you all about getting from Hills Village to the Cultural Campout, so I'll make it easy and speed things up:

1. I packed furiously and looked for my stuff.

2. Had a Grade-Three Meltdown because I couldn't find my ABSOLUTE FAVORITE T-shirt.
3. Found my ABSOLUTE FAVORITE T-shirt exactly where it should be, neatly folded on top of a stack of other T-shirts.
4. Slept through my alarm.
5. Grandma Dotty got a speeding ticket.

6. Embarrassed (but secretly pleased) by Mom and Georgia giving me a very public hug at the departure gate.
7. Plane took off.
8. Plane landed.
9. Boarded another, smaller plane.
10. Boarded an even smaller plane …

Long-haul Flight
Zombie...



THIS IS YOUR JOHNNO SPEAKING

THE LAST PLANE was so small it had a *propeller* instead of a proper grown-up jet engine.

I was also close enough to hear the pilot without him needing a microphone. I was so close I was practically sitting on his lap. The badge on his sweat-stained shirt told me his name was Johnno. Johnno hadn't shaved since he was in diapers and looked like he cut his own hair with a butter knife.

There were only three passengers aboard. Me, a Scottish kid called Glen Coe, who was another Young Artist heading for the Cultural Campout, and a Fijian lady named Barbara, who sat right at the back of the plane and never once opened her eyes during the three-hour flight from Darwin. I only knew her name was Barbara because Johnno had asked everyone before we took off.

"If anything goes wrong, I don't like to hit the deck without knowin' every other drongo who's crashin' with me!" Johnno had joked. At least I think he'd been joking.

I didn't laugh.

There was one thing I'd forgotten about back in Hills Village—one small problem that I'd overlooked in all the excitement about coming here again. One thing that should come with a safety warning attached:

Australians.

UH-OH

OKAY, BECAUSE I know there might be one or two Australians reading this, I'm going to choose my words very carefully.

Australians are nuts. There's no getting around it. Capital N. Capital U. Capital T. Capital S.

NUTS.

Exhibit A: Captain Johnno. I reckon the only place on the planet that would allow a guy like Johnno behind the controls of a passenger plane would be Australia.

"Cop an eyeful of that, mate!" Captain Johnno yelled. "Bigbottom Creek—ya bewdy!"

He jabbed an oil-stained finger down at what looked like a bunch of dusty cardboard boxes scattered across a gigantic bowl of red dirt.

Glen pointed at something on the ground. "Whut a crawkie!" he said.

I looked at him blankly.

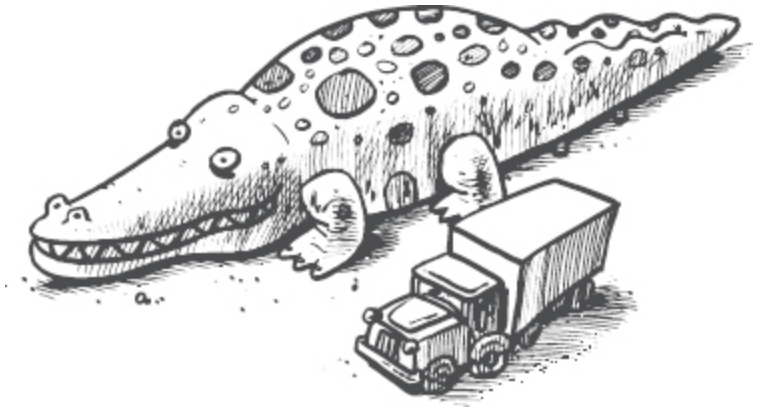
"Crawk. Oar. *Deel*." He pronounced every word very carefully as though he was talking to a deaf person.

"Ohhh, *crocodile*," I said.

Glen shook his head and looked at me sadly. It was a look other people have given me before. Lots of times.

Glen was right—there was a crocodile in Bigbottom Creek and it was HUGE.

I knew Australia was stuffed to overflowing with eleventy billion terrifying creatures but, even from the air, this thing looked like it dwarfed the truck parked right next to it.



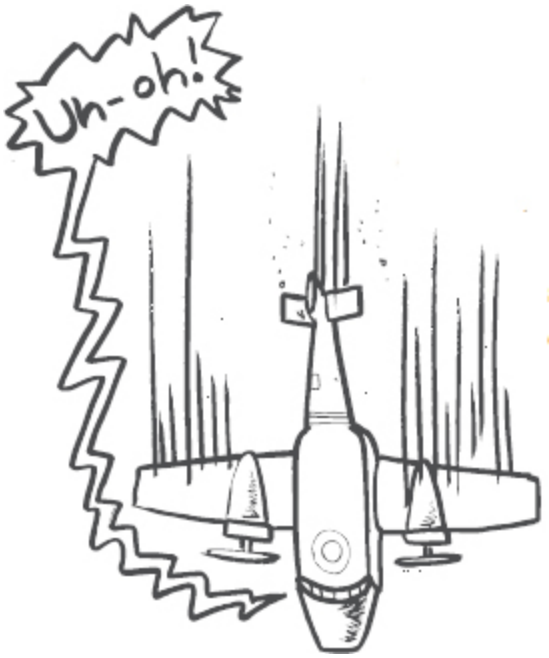
“The Big Croc,” Johnno said proudly. “Best Big Croc in Australia, mate. I heard they got one over in Tamalamadingdong but it ain’t a patch on Old Bluey!”

“Old Bluey?” I screeched over the engine noise.

Johnno picked up a large spanner and hit the cockpit controls with one end. The engine gave one giant, wheezy burp and the propeller stopped turning. “Uh-oh,” he muttered.

“Uh-oh?” I repeated.

Take it from me, “uh-oh” is not something you ever want to hear your pilot say, especially when the plane’s nose is tilted ninety degrees and pointing directly at the ground. We started dropping toward Bigbottom Creek at about a trillion miles an hour.



Johnno smacked the control panel again and the propeller began turning. Coincidentally, I also began breathing again. With the engine running, Johnno started bringing us in for landing.

There was only one problem as far as I could see.

“Um, Johnno?” I squeaked. “Where’s the runway?”

Johnno laughed. “Runway? There’s no runway at Bigbottom, son!” He jutted his bristly chin at one of the dirt tracks. “We use the road, mate, like every other muppet. I’ve just got to make sure we get down quick enough so we don’t get marmalized!”

He pointed at a dust cloud spewing out from behind the wheels of a ginormous truck barrelling toward Bigbottom Creek on a direct collision course with our plane.

“Come on, you clanking old bucket of rust!” Johnno yelled, his crazy Australian eyes bulging. “WOOOOOOOOHOOOOO! It’s gonna be close!”

Glen screamed and Barbara dropped dead.

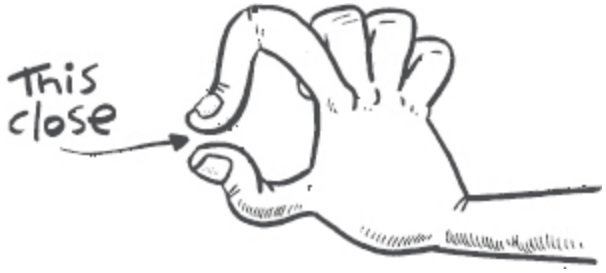
I closed my eyes and waited for The End.

BIGBOTTOM CREEK: GETAWAY TO ABSOLUTELY NOTHING

JOHNNO WAS WRONG.

It wasn't close.

It was SUPER-CLOSE. Like, *really, really, really, really* close.



A microsecond before the propeller began digging a hole in the dirt, Johnno braced his feet against the cockpit dashboard and hauled back on the joystick with everything he had.

The plane, with its engine screaming and every rusty rivet straining, straightened up and touched down—right in front of the giant truck. Johnno swung the plane off the road, and the truck driver blared his horn as he swept past in a plume of red dirt and anger. Johnno wiped the sweat off his brow and looked up to the sky.

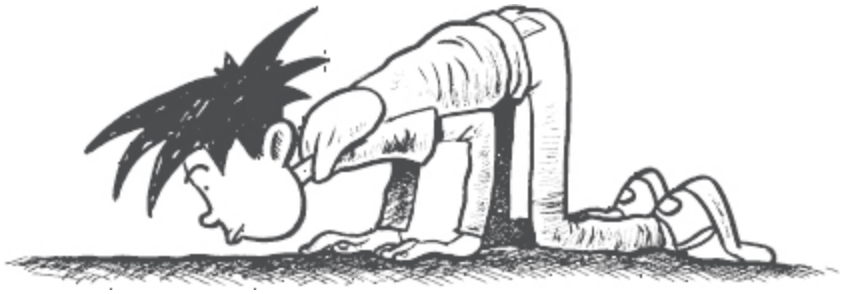
"Thanks, big man," he said, and switched off the crummy engines. As they clattered to silence, Johnno turned to us. "Your bags can be collected from carousel three, just as soon as our ground staff have completed their work."

Glen, Barbara, and I clambered out of the plane and staggered to the terminal—a small tin shed that looked more like a bus stop. Behind us,

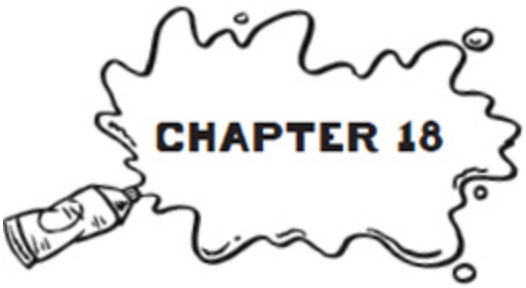
Johnno slung our bags into a pile on the dirt.

"Carousel three right here!" he shouted. "You blokes enjoy Bigbottom Creek!" Johnno gave us a thumbs-up, then turned and sprinted to a large wooden building with a sign that said BIGBOTTOM CREEK HOTEL. Barbara grabbed her bags and stumbled into a waiting pickup truck without a word. As the dust settled, Glen and I looked at each other like two soldiers at the end of a battle. Glen said something in Scottish.

I didn't reply. It seemed safer. For all I knew, he might have just asked me to rob a bank, or get married, or both. I didn't care. Bigbottom Creek didn't look like much but I could have kissed every last lousy inch of red dirt because the place had one really, really MASSIVE thing in its favor: it was on the ground.



I'd never noticed how totally *awesome* the ground was before. The ground was now my favorite place to be in the whole world. I was *never* going on a plane again. If that meant walking all the way back to Hills Village or swimming the Pacific, then that's exactly what I was going to do. After Captain Johnno, sharks would be easy.



WHERE'S ELLIE?

THERE WAS NO ONE there to meet us, so Glen and I grabbed our stuff and headed over to the hotel. I have to admit I felt kind of disappointed.

It's not like I'd expected a marching band or anything—okay, maybe I *had* been expecting a marching band, or whatever the equivalent of a marching band was in Bigbottom Creek—but at least there could have been *something*.

Bigbottom Creek Hotel wasn't much of a hotel but, like most places in Australia, it looked friendly enough. The guy behind the check-in desk directed us to a room at the back.

"The reception's in there, fellas," he said. "Just leave your gear with me and I'll stow it in your room."

The back room was packed and noisy with people chatting and eating. A man carrying a notebook looked like he was from a newspaper. Someone else was setting up a video camera next to a small stage. There was a bunch

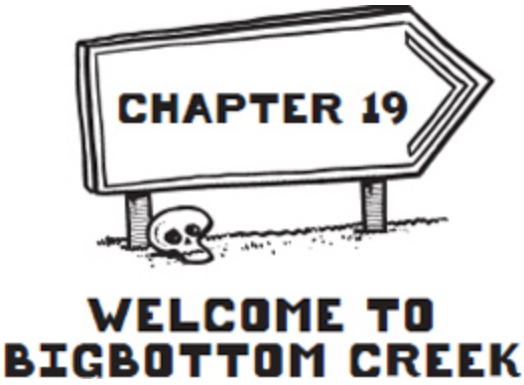
of guys in business suits talking to a guy with a big bushy beard. Everywhere you looked there were smiling faces and those weird Australian accents and I began to feel a whole lot better. I remembered how much I liked Australia.

A woman with purple hair sitting behind a table near the door slapped a name tag on me and Glen. “Grab a plate and dig in,” she said, pointing to a long table piled high with food. “You’re the last to arrive but there’s plenty there.”

“Great,” Glen said, and headed for the table. “Ah’m starving!”

I was hungry too but I hung back to see if I could spot Ellie. Of all the reasons I’d given Mom for going to the Cultural Campout, the only one I hadn’t mentioned—seeing Ellie again—was right there at the top.

I began to get that pukey kind of feeling in my stomach. What if she wasn’t there? *What if she’d decided not to come?*



“KNUCKLES!” SOMEONE YELLED from behind me. Suddenly, I felt the kind of pain you get when someone rubs their knuckles right on the crown of your skull.

“OW!” I spun around, ready to defend myself, and came face to face with Ellie grinning from ear to ear, her right hand bunched into prime knuckling position. She hadn’t changed a bit—which, to be honest, was just fine with me.

“Sorry,” she said in a voice that didn’t sound even a tiny bit sorry. “Did that hurt, diddums?”

I rubbed the top of my head. It hurt like mad. “No,” I lied. (Have you ever been knuckled? It hurts like *crazy*.)

“I must have done it wrong then,” Ellie said, and lunged at me again.

I danced out of the way and knocked over a large ad for a TV show. It read: THE BRUSHES MCGARRITY (FAMOUS DISCOVERER OF THE ROCKY HILLS CAVE PAINTINGS) ALL-AUSTRALIAN PAINTIN’ AND FISHIN’ SHOW! EVERY MONDAY, 3.20 AM, NBNBBC DIGITAL LOCAL.

“Easy!” someone said as I picked up the cardboard cut-out. “Don’t damage the publicity, mate.”

I turned around to see the real-life version of the man on the cardboard cut-out.

“Brushes McGarrity,” he said, offering up a massive, gnarled paw. “Welcome to Bigbottom Creek.”

CHAPTER 20

I'M NOT MUCH OF A TALKER ...

BRUSHES MCGARRITY SMELLED of paint and horses and looked like he'd been carved out of the ground Bigbottom Creek was built on: he was red, dusty, and wrinkled. He wore a full-length leather coat and a leather hat that matched his leather skin. His beard was made from wire and his teeth were a cheesy yellow. He couldn't have looked more Australian if he'd been riding a kangaroo across Sydney Harbor Bridge with a koala on his back, waving a cricket bat and eating a vegemite sandwich. I shook Brushes' hand and tried not to show any pain as he mangled my fingers.

"Welcome to the best little outback town in the whole of Australia!" Brushes said. He peered at my name tag. "Ralph."

“Rafe,” I said automatically, but Brushes had already gone.

He stepped up onto a little stage at one side of the annexe, put two fingers in his mouth, and blew a whistle that could be heard on the moon. “Gather around, everyone!” he yelled. “The last couple of blokes have arrived, so we can get this road on the show.

“Now, most of you will know me from *The Brushes McGarrity All-Australian Paintin’ and Fishin’ Show* on NBNBBC Digital Local, or from my reputation as the bloke who discovered the best collection of Aboriginal cave paintings this side of Brisbane, or maybe as one of the Top End’s best-loved painters. I’m here today in another role. Now, I’m not much of a talker, but I’m prouder than a Parramatta parrot to be hosting this first-ever Cultural Campout. Thanks to the generosity of the Institute for the Advancement of Writers and Contemporary American Artists in Washington, and our own Northern Territory MegaGlobal Industries, Bigbottom Creek can now be …”

For someone who wasn’t much of a talker, Brushes McGarrity sure could talk.

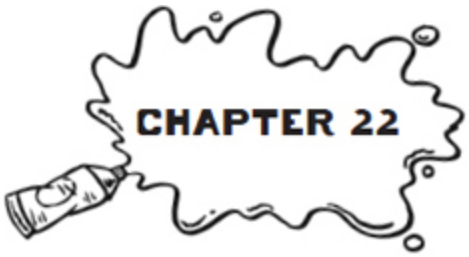
NEVER SHARE A ROOM WITH A FARTY BRAZILIAN

THE REST OF the night was all kinds of cool. I got interviewed by the local paper and someone took a bunch of photos of us all. I caught up with Ellie and met the other Young Artists. Bigbottom Creek might not have been the best-looking town in Australia but it knew how to make us feel welcome.

Six of us Young Artists—the guys (me, Glen, Thiago DaSilva from Brazil, Vloot Van Vlader from Holland, Denny Briggs from Australia, and Eric Okoh from Ghana … more on them later)—were sharing a dorm room at the top of the hotel. This had some good points and some bad ones. The good was that everyone was so jazzed about being on the trip that we felt like friends already.

The bad part was that Thiago sounded (and smelled) like he was in training for the South American Farting Championships.

In the end, though, I didn’t care. One farty Brazilian wasn’t going to get between me and eighteen hours of beautiful, uninterrupted shut-eye. I fell asleep to the sound of Thiago *parping* to a salsa beat from under his sheets. To be honest, if you took the smell away, it was kind of soothing.



ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE BREAKFAST

SIX SECONDS AFTER my head touched the pillow, I was being shaken awake by a zombie.

"Time to go, bud," the zombie said.

I blinked and looked through the window at the black sky. "You've got to be kidding," I croaked. "It's still night-time."

"Tell me about it," said the zombie, who, when I looked a little closer, turned out to be Denny. His skin had gone a funny green color. "I think I'm gonna puke."

"*Parp*," farted Thiago.

Ten minutes later, I was eating breakfast in a freezing-cold dining room with the rest of the Young Artists. It was four o'clock and the dining room at the Bigbottom Creek Hotel looked exactly how I imagine the world would look after a nuclear war.

"Can you believe this?" I said to Ellie.

Ellie glanced up from her bowl of cereal and held up her hand. "Can't talk. Too early."

Eric, who was sitting next to her, wore the disappointed expression of someone who'd been given crummy information about Australia being hot.

He was wearing every item of clothing he'd brought with him.

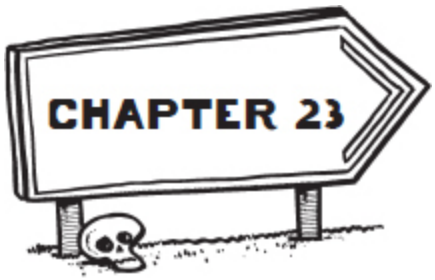
"S-so c-cold," he said, his teeth chattering. He stared at me like everything was my fault.

Monique from Vietnam was in pretty much the same state as Eric. Only Glen, Linda from Latvia, and Yrsa from Iceland looked even slightly comfortable. Denny, who I'd thought should have known what the local conditions were going to be like, had his face flat on the table with drool pooling around his open mouth.

"It's a long drive out to the Rocky Hills," Brushes said, shouting over the clatter of dishes and cutlery. "Eat up, campers, and let's get this road on the show!"

I have a thing about people who say things like that. It's bad enough in the middle of the day. At four in the morning it makes me want to put my head down on the table and cry.

Still, I thought, things could only get better.

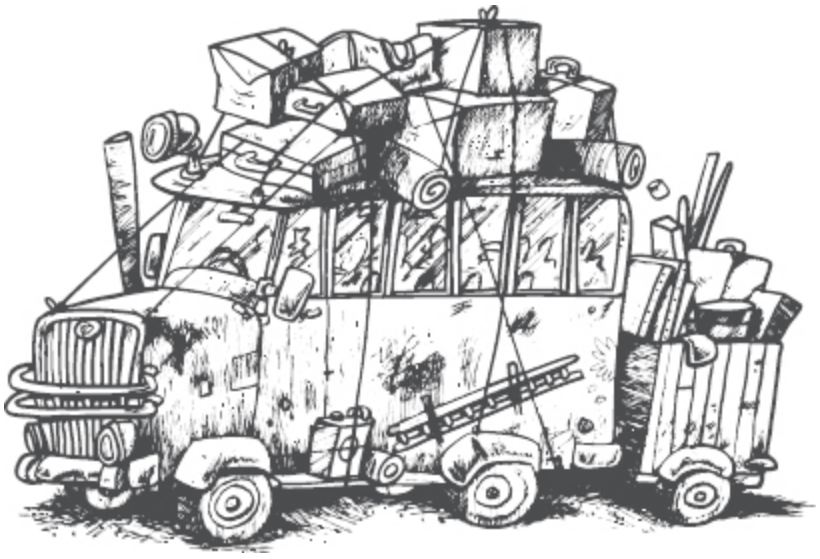


FUN

THINGS DIDN’T GET BETTER.

After breakfast, we were all herded onto the bus, which was pretty funny because the bus kind of looked like a cattle truck with seats. Hard balls of dried cow dung rolled around the floor. In a couple of places I could see the dirt road through rips in the rusty metal. In one corner of the roof was a bird’s nest. I was pretty sure at least two of the marks in the side panel nearest me were bullet holes. All our gear, and all the gear for the camp, had been strapped to the top and sides.

Everyone found a spot and went to sleep, trying our best not to freeze to death while, up front, Brushes and his giant cousin, Vern, took turns driving. That’s right: this drive was going to be so long it took *two* drivers to handle it. Woohoo.



Soon after we rolled out of Bigbottom Creek, the sun came up and I opened my eyes. Okay, even though my eyes felt like they'd been taken out in the night, dipped in grit, and then replaced, I have to admit my first outback sunrise was really something to see.

It was awesome.

Maybe because we were surrounded by all that nothingness, the sun seemed to be about three times bigger than it was back in Hills Village, where it had to compete with things like trees and hills and strip malls and gas stations.

I fidgeted uncomfortably on the bone-hard seat and closed my eyes.

ATTACHING STRINGS TO THE KNEES OF GIANT MOTHS

I WAS DREAMING about Jeanne Galletta when Ellie tapped me on the shoulder.

"How are you going?" she asked.

I opened my eyes and saw Denny's head resting on her shoulder. I wasn't sure how to feel about that. I mean, Jeanne Galletta is obviously the Most Wonderful Girl in the Entire Universe, so seeing Ellie with some random kid's head on her shoulder shouldn't have bothered me … but it did.

Was it hormones? Stupidity? Discuss.

"I was doing okay till you woke me up," I said in a croaky voice. The bus went over a particularly nasty bump and I almost hit the roof. If I hadn't already gotten used to the road I'd have bitten my tongue clean off.

"Whoa," Denny said, jerking awake. "Intense." He stretched and yawned. "So where are you from, Rafe?" He'd asked me exactly the same thing last night but must have forgotten. I told him and he nodded like he knew exactly where Hills Village was.

He was from someplace called Kyogle. Besides Ellie, he was the only other Australian on the trip, unless you counted Brushes McGarrity and Cousin Vern.

"Where's Kyogle?" I asked him. It sounded exotic.

Denny waved his hand vaguely over his shoulder. "Northern New South Wales, about two and a half thousand kay from here, mate," he said. "Walked the whole way, barefoot. Took me six weeks."

I looked at Ellie to check if Denny was putting me on, but she looked impressed. Denny was an Aboriginal Australian, after all. From watching movies about Australia, I figured that all Aboriginal Australians knew a lot about surviving in the outback. Denny didn't look much like someone who *could* walk two thousand miles across baking desert, but what did I know? I was from Hills Village. The nearest I ever got to a desert hike was getting caught in the Sahara Sand Trap during a round of putt-putt.

"Lived off the land, bro," Denny explained. "Ate witchetty grubs and snakes, the odd lizard. Drank from ancient springs buried deep in the ground. Slept in the day, walked at night. Used some phozzies to see where I was going."

"Phozzies?" I said.

Denny spread his palms wide. "Giant phosphorescent bush moths *this* big. Get a few of those fellas and tie a string to their knees. It's better 'n a Bunnings torch every time."

"Wow," I said. I didn't even know moths *had* knees. "That's *amazing*."

Denny tapped a finger against the side of his nose and nodded wisely. “Bushcraft, mate.”

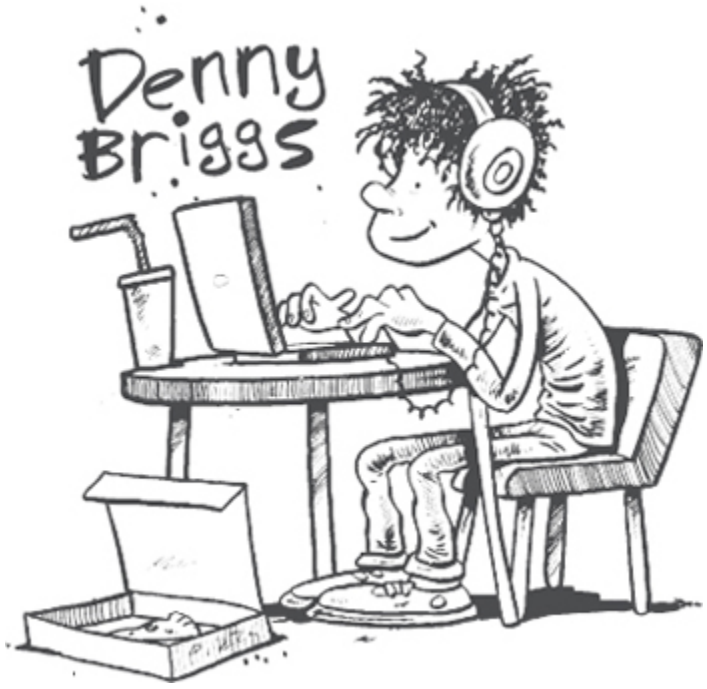
Listening to Denny, I finally felt like I was in touch with the real Australia. He might even show me how to trap some phozzies, I thought. I could learn to live off the land, maybe ride some wild kangaroos, milk a wombat (or whatever it is you do with wombats), lasso a lorikeet.

Denny and Ellie looked at each other before they burst out laughing and bumped fists.

“You idiot, Rafe,” Ellie said, wiping away tears.

“Hook, line, *and* sinker.” Denny curled a finger inside his mouth and imitated a fish being caught, then sank back into his seat and laughed like a demented hyena.

There was no such thing as phozzies. Denny hadn’t walked any further to get to Bigbottom Creek than from the terminal at Kyogle to the plane. He’d never set foot in the outback. He specialized in digital photography and would sooner eat his own ears than scarf down a witchetty grub.



“Very funny,” I said in a voice that meant I thought it was the opposite of funny.

“Yes, it was!” Ellie wheezed, holding her sides. “*Phozzies!*”

Denny was laughing so much it looked painful. “No more,” he gasped. “Please!”

I turned my back to them and slithered down in my seat.

Sometimes it was hard to like Australians.

TURN ME OVER, I'M DONE

I DIDN'T SULK for too long—maybe two hours, three tops.

And all that time, the sun got a whole heap hotter. Remember how cold I said it was when we set off? Scrub that. Now it was hotter than the inside of Swifty's grill. If I was a burger, I'd be done.

"You blokes okay in the back?" Brushes shouted.

I tried to answer but my tongue was too dry. We were *cooking*. I was pretty sure Glen had died or at least fallen into a coma. He hadn't made a sound since we'd set out. Hadn't these people heard of air-conditioning?

Sure, the windows of the bus were open, but all that meant was that the thermo-nuclear desert air streaming in baked us just that little bit quicker. Before we were halfway to Rocky Hills, you could have fried eggs on my head.

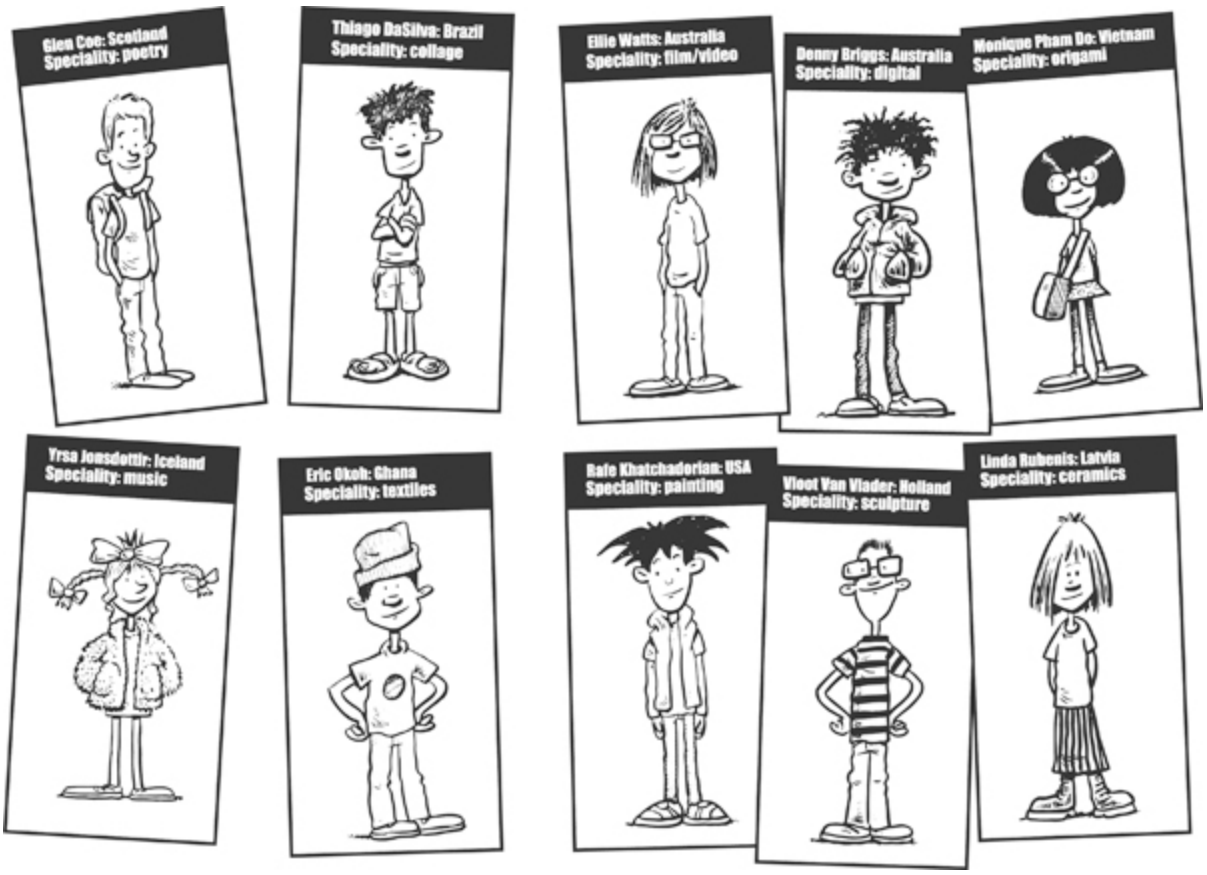
The only good thing about the marathon drive was: (a) it was a long way from Miller the Killer and My Life As a Dishpig in Hills Village; and (b) we had plenty of time to get to know all the other Young Artists better.

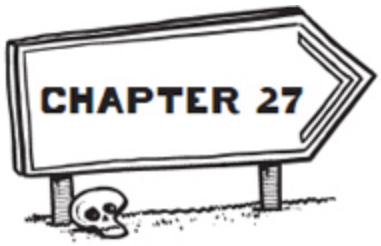
Most of them couldn’t speak great English and I couldn’t speak a word of Latvian, Vietnamese, Portuguese, Dutch, or Scottish, but with a bit of sign language and lots of facial expressions, we managed to get by. Like I say, it was a very long drive.

CHAPTER 26

THE OTHER GUYS

I GUESS NOW'S as good a time as any to introduce all the other guys on the trip:



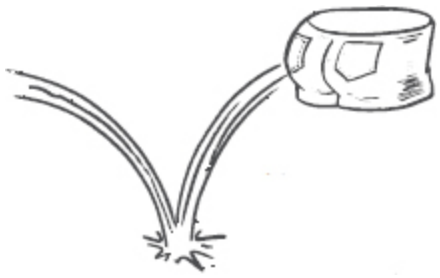


THE STRANGE CASE OF RAFE'S DISAPPEARING BUTT

ALL BAD THINGS come to an end eventually—even The Bus Ride from Bigbottom Creek. Vern pulled the bus to a halt in a part of the desert that looked exactly like every other part of the desert we'd passed on the journey, and switched off the ignition.

"Okay, folks, look lively," Brushes said, sounding way too cheerful for someone who'd just gone through what we'd gone through. "We've got a camp to set up!"

I tried to stand, but after bouncing around in the back of the Mars-temperature bus for about a year, all feeling had gone from the Khatchadorian *gluteus maximus*. I'm not kidding—my rear end had totally disappeared. I no longer possessed a butt. I was buttless, bootyfree, bunloose, *sans derrière*.



While big Vern started dragging our bags off the bus, I managed to peel myself off the vinyl seat and stagger out as my butt made a reluctant, gradual reappearance.

I stepped outside to get my first glimpse of The Real Outback and the place that would be our home for the next couple of weeks. Here's what I saw:

It was hotter out there than a Mexican chilli with extra chilli on the side. There was scrub, a few rocks with a bigger heap of rocks in the distance, and then a great big heap of nothing. The nothingness stretched toward the horizon in all directions. It was the most nothing I had ever seen in one place.

And I've been to East Texas.*

"What were you expecting?" Leo whispered.

I don't know why he was whispering, seeing as he's imaginary, but he was. Go figure.

Leo's my imaginary brother, by the way. Kind of. I mean, I did once have a brother called Leo but he died when I was too small to remember him. He shows up occasionally and I talk to him. I know it sounds kind of

wacko, but having Leo around helps me figure things out sometimes. This is Leo:

Anyway, when Leo piped up, I didn't reply. Mainly because I didn't want to look like a nut in front of Ellie and the rest of the Young Artists by talking to my imaginary brother, but also because I didn't really have an answer.

What *had* I been expecting? Guitar-shaped swimming pools? Shopping malls? The Taj Mahal?

Well, no, not exactly, but I suppose I thought there might've been a *hint* of civilization. A toilet block, maybe. A tent or two. *Something*.

I'M AN ARTIST, GET ME OUTTA HERE!

"GRAB YOUR SWAGS and bags, Cultural Campers, and find a spot," McGarrity said, smiling. At least, I think he was smiling. It was hard to tell behind all that face fungus.

"What's a swag?" I asked. "And where's the campsite?"

McGarrity picked up what looked like a sleeping bag. "You're standing on the campsite, Ralphie, mate. And *this* is a swag," he said. "It's a little bit different to your double-sprung king-size at the Hollywood Hilton, eh?" He threw the swag in my direction and walked back to the bus, chuckling to himself.

I had never felt so *foreign* in my life, and one glance at my fellow campers told me that they were feeling the same. It was like we'd arrived on the dark side of the moon. A lizard about the size of a labrador scuttled past and gave us a long disgusted stare before disappearing under a rock.

"*Thish* ish the camp?" Vloot asked. (Btw, he doesn't have a lisp—that's just the way Dutch people speak English.)

"Looks that way," Ellie said. She prodded her swag with her foot. "And this is what we're sleeping on."

"Nae tents?" Glen said. "Ah cannae believe it."

"*Parp!*" said Thaigo's butt. *"Parp, parp."*

"You said it, dude," Denny muttered, putting his hand over his nose. "Y'know, this is just like the start of a horror movie, when a heap of kids go somewhere real far from everything and then at night they start disappearing and stuff."

Ellie rolled her eyes. “Gee, thanks, Denny. Bedtime stories like that are just what we need.”

“I’m scary,” Linda said in a small voice.

“Scared,” I corrected.

A weird dragging sound was coming from somewhere behind me. I turned to see Cousin Vern pulling an axe out of a metal toolbox and jumped about eight feet in the air.

“He’s just chopping some wood for the fire, Rafe,” Ellie said. “I think.”

Monique looked longingly at the bus. She wasn’t the only one. Eric burst into tears. Okay, he didn’t. But it was close.

Long and uncomfortable as the journey out here had been, I reckon most of us would have gone straight back to Bigbottom Creek quicker than you could say “I’m an artist … Get me outta here!”

COOL WITH A CHANCE OF HUMAN SACRIFICE

I WAS PRETTY sure that Brushes McGarrity noticed that us Young Artists were getting twitchy. I was also pretty sure that he was *enjoying* us being scared.

It made me kind of mad, and getting mad made me feel a bit braver. You ever get that? No? Well, I do, and right then it was making me real determined not to let Brushes have the last laugh.

"C'mon," Brushes shouted. "Let's get moving!"

Reluctantly, we dragged our swags over to where Brushes was making a ring of stones.

"That's for the human sacrifices," Denny whispered. "I wonder who they're gonna do first? My bet's on Vloot. He's the biggest."

Ellie jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow. "It's for the campfire, idiot!" she hissed.

Sure enough, Cousin Vern lumbered past and dumped a heap of wood in the middle of the ring.

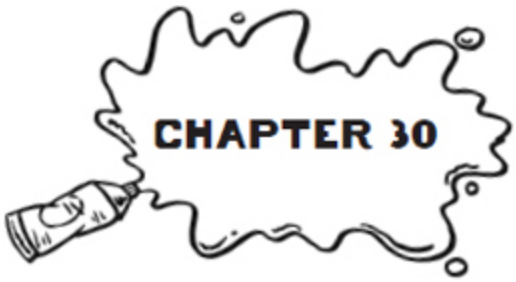
When we'd all arranged our swags around the campfire, Brushes got us all to drag some bigger rocks closer. We draped our swags over them and used them as chairs. It wasn't exactly The Ritz but it was more comfortable than you might think. While we were doing that, Cousin Vern started to make dinner.

This was good and bad. On the one hand, I *was* starving. On the other, it meant Vern had substituted his axe for a large knife.

Brushes got the fire going and, in about three seconds, it was burning away like he'd flicked an ON switch. Remember how hot it had been? Well, now with the sun dipping below the horizon, the temperature was starting to

drop pretty quick. Of course, being from different places, we all reacted differently.

After he got the fire going, Brushes went over to the bus and came back with a cardboard box. “You’ll all be needing one of these,” he said, and pulled out a small spade. “It’s …”



CHOOSE YOUR ENEMIES WISELY

MAYBE I SHOULDN'T have done it, but I couldn't help myself. There was just something about McGarrity's bristly leather face that made me want to show him we weren't total dorks. So when he pulled out the spade, I cut right across him.

"I know what it is," I said, stopping Brushes mid-sentence. "It's a poop spade. For burying our poop, right?"

Chalk one up to me! KHATCHADORIAN: 1 MCGARRITY: 0!

But if *I* knew what the spade was for, it was pretty obvious that no one else did. And they weren't happy. At all.

"What?" Ellie said. "There are no toilets? Is that even *legal*?"

Denny took the spade from Brushes and gave it a look so full of disgust I was surprised the thing didn't melt. "That is *so* not cool."

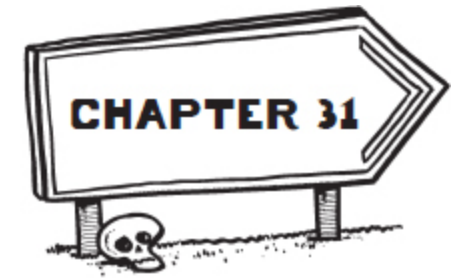
Thiago laughed as if he'd never heard anything so ridiculous. Linda put her hand to her mouth and looked like she was going to be sick.

I know what you're all thinking: when did Rafe Khatchadorian get so wise and stuff about bush toilets? Huh? Huh? When did he become King of the Outback? And I'd say to you: The Program.

On The Program at Camp Wannamorra, I'd dealt with a lot more than pooping in the woods. I'd taken everything Sergeant Fish had thrown at me with a smile on my face. Okay, maybe I didn't actually smile *all* the time, but you know what I mean. I'd done some wild camping, I'd survived raging rivers, and I'd faced down bears. How bad could it be at the Cultural Campout? Being A Man of Experience was something I was getting to like.

I could almost feel my brain absorbing the idea that things which seem unpleasant at the time can, in the end, make you a stronger person.

Maybe things were going to work out fine at the Cultural Campout.
Linda leaned into the fire and puked.
Or maybe not.



KAMP KULTURE

THAT FIRST EVENING at Kamp Kulture was kind of … interesting.

Kamp Kulture, you say? Ellie had renamed the Cultural Campout about ten minutes after Linda hurled and the name just kind of stuck.

As the sun disappeared, Brushes called us over to get some food. And you know what? Vern had done a pretty good job on the barbecue. He'd even catered for the two vegetarians in the group.

Okay, so he hadn't exactly gone to a lot of trouble by throwing six veggie sausages on the griddle, but I guess the thought was there. I was so hungry I could have eaten a slice of fried tire and a side of sand, but sinking my teeth into the national Aussie meal of sausage sangas slathered in ketchup was a whole lot better.

We sat on our rocks around the fire and ate and talked and drank hot tea from a billy can.

It was good.

With some food in my belly and the campfire crackling away, I started warming up to Kamp Kulture again. Maybe I'd misjudged Brushes and Vern. They might *look* like weirdo psycho outback serial killers, but they had set up the camp real nice and made a good dinner and it wasn't their fault we had to poop in the desert. I was kind of regretting showing off about the poop spade now. I took a slurp of tea, leaned back against my rock, and looked up at the stars. I could feel the magic of the outback settling into my soul.

And then Brushes started singing.

MEET ME AT THE BILLABONG, BETTY

TRUST ME—UNTIL you've heard Brushes McGarrity "singing" "The Man from Snowy River," you haven't truly suffered.

The dude had been making progress down the list of Khatchadorian's Least Favorite People, what with the campfire and the food and all, but once he opened his hairy facehole and began wailing, he moved up about fifty places (it's a long list). As soon as he opened his mush, every animal

and insect within a hundred yards stampeded directly for the horizon. What little plant life there was near the campsite abandoned all hope and dropped stone-dead. When Brushes went for a high note (and missed by a couple of miles) the rock I was leaning against flinched. Two passing bats got so confused by the wailing they collided and dropped to the ground, unconscious. You getting the picture yet? He *sucked*.

Brushes followed “The Man from Snowy River” with “Waltzing Matilda” and “Meet Me at the Billabong, Betty,” then “My Kangaroo Won’t Stop Jumping” and about six zillion other Aussie songs.

I wasn’t even Australian and I was embarrassed. Ellie and Denny looked like they wanted to crawl into the nearest cave.

And Brushes didn’t stop there. Outback stories, bush poetry, and the tale of his discovery of the cave paintings came next. The man just went on and on.

And on.

And on.

DON'T FEED THE DINGOES

TO BE FAIR, some of what Brushes was saying was *kind of* interesting. And he sure looked the part.

Brushes was wearing a sort of Australian cowboy-style hat and a battered full-length coat made out of what looked like (and probably was) an old tarp off the back of a truck. Lit by the flickering campfire, he could have stepped straight out of 1892.

"Mysterious place, eh?" he said, holding his hands out to the flames. He stared at each of us. "It's been a sacred place for our people for generations. Don't be surprised if you get caught up in the Dreaming tonight."

Denny snorted, then quickly covered it up with a cough when Brushes glared at him. "Got a bit of sausage stuck," Denny said, pointing at his throat.

"You need to watch that," Brushes growled, standing up. "Could be dangerous." He gave Denny a meaningful glare. "Best make it an early one tonight, campers. We'll be heading to the Rocky Hills tomorrow to see my famous McGarrity Cave Paintings—the finest Aboriginal cave paintings in the whole of Australia and you'll all want to be fresh for *that*." He jerked a thumb at the bus. "Vern's rigging up a shower over there for anyone who needs it."

"Starting with Vern," Ellie whispered.

"Not enough water in Australia to get that bloke clean," Denny said.

"Any questions?" Brushes asked.

Vloot put up a hand. "Hot tub?"

“The outback’s no place for softies,” Brushes said. His smile was still in place but his eyes narrowed. It wasn’t something to get worked up about, but I could tell Brushes McGarrity wasn’t someone who liked to be on the end of anyone’s joke.

As if to confirm this, he scratched his beard in a way that seemed to be saying “I’m on to you, Khatchadorian.” He pulled down the brim of his hat so all I could see of his eyes were two pinpricks of reflected light.

“Where’s your swag, Brushes?” Denny asked.

Brushes scoffed. “Me? I find a nice flat bit of ground, boot away any stones, and bunk down right there. No swags, no fancy showers, no room service, no *jacuzzis*—just the stars and the Dreamtime for old Brushes McGarrity.” He paused and pointed a finger at the group, his voice going even lower and growlier than it had been before. It was the voice of the guy who does the voice-overs on scary movie trailers. “G’night, campers. Sleep tight. Make sure the dingoes don’t bite.”

Brushes turned and walked off into the darkness. There was no sign of Vern.

“Dingoes?” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. I didn’t like the sound of dingoes one little bit.

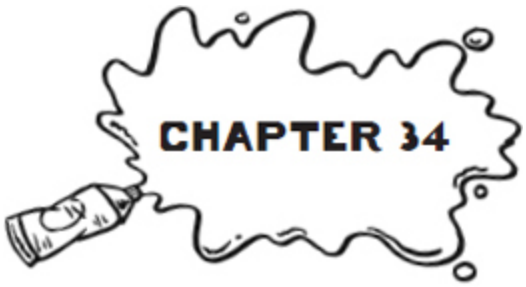
“Wild dogs,” Denny explained.

“What do you mean ‘wild dogs’? You can’t just say ‘wild dogs’ and leave it at that! Are they dangerous?”

Denny nodded. “Sometimes, but we should be okay. They usually only attack small children and tourists.”

There were a couple of things wrong with Denny’s answer—mainly the words “should” and “usually”. I was hoping for something like “dingoes are perfectly harmless, you’ll be fine”. And wasn’t *I* a kind of tourist? Would dingoes be able to tell a visiting Young Artist from a regular tourist?

It was going to be a long night.



BOOFBOOM

I'D READ ABOUT the Dreamtime in the book Ellie had sent me.

Don't look so surprised. I take my art seriously, and like all artists, I've got to do my research—and to be honest, once I got started I couldn't stop. I read everything, from the Rainbow Serpent to how Uluru (the big rock) was formed. It turns out that some stories are so sacred they can't be told to outsiders, which is pretty cool. (There were over two thousand language groups before 1770, btw.)

Dreamtime stories are kind of like a guide on how the world was created and why things are the way they are. Art plays a pretty big role in the storytelling too. Ellie's book had pictures of ancient cave paintings and contemporary Indigenous Australian art. Some of them were completely made up of dots and symbols, and the book explained what they all meant and how important these stories were to Indigenous Australians. It made me think of Denny and I suddenly understood why he'd been so snappy with Brushes.

The fire had gone out and all the other Kampers were fast asleep, but I was wide awake. Maybe it was jet lag. Maybe it was the sausage sangas gurgling in my stomach. Or maybe, just maybe, it was the thought of being ripped to bite-sized pieces by a rabid pack of wild desert dogs.

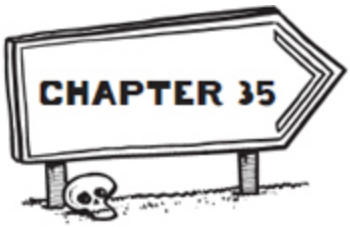
Was I the ONLY sane one here?

Wasn't anyone else even a *little* concerned about drongos or dongoes or whatever was roaming around in the outback? And were Brushes and Vern supposed to just abandon us like that?

I tried counting sheep but they kept getting eaten by dingoes. Plus, every time I was about to drift off, I'd hear a squeak or a rustle, and my head would pop back up, my eyes wide, hopelessly scanning the blackness for whatever was out there.

And just when I could finally, finally, *finally* feel sleep pulling me in, I heard a sound that I *knew* wasn't in my imagination. My eyes snapped open. This wasn't a case of a was-it-wasn't-it rustle. It wasn't an imaginary squeak. It was a very real *boofboom* kind of noise way off in the distance.

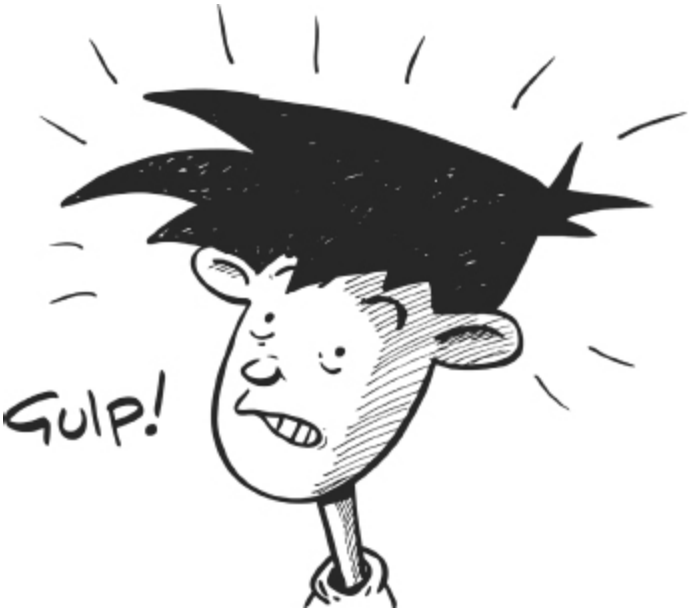
I'm pretty sure it was the type of sound some tourist-munching desert monster thing would make.



REMEMBER THAT SCENE IN *JURASSIC PARK*?

I SAT BOLT upright with the swag clutched around me, every Khatchadorian nerve ending vibrating like crazy.

"H-he-llo?" I said. "Is anyone there?" (Like a monster would reply.)



Boofboom.

There it was again, closer and louder this time and about fifty times more scary.

"D-d-did anyone else h-hear th-that?" I whispered, the words dry in my throat.

The only answer came in the form of a fart from somewhere over near Thiago. It was the one time in my life I've been glad to hear a fart. At least it meant everyone else wasn't already dead.

"Ellie? Denny?" I croaked. "Glen?"

Not a peep. Not even a *parp*.

BOOFBOOM!

Whatever was making that sound was getting *real* close to the campsite. I could feel the bass notes vibrating under my already twitchy butt.

It was exactly like that dinosaur movie. You know the one where the kids are trapped in the wrecked jeep just outside the T. rex enclosure and there's a glass of water (why?) on the dash? Everything's real quiet and then the kid hears a sort of *boof* noise and the water ripples outwards from the center of the glass and the kid knows—just *knows*—that the sound is caused by the massive thudding footsteps of an ENORMOUS T. REX THAT'S GETTING NEARER AND NEARER AND …

THE STINK FROM BEYOND THE BEYOND

BOOFBOOM!

The whole camp vibrated like the surface of the water in the glass on the dash of the jeep outside the enclosure in that dinosaur movie. (I know that sentence sort of runs on and on and there should be some commas and stuff in there, but I was way too terrified to sort out my grammar.)

Directly above my head—so close I could almost touch it—a massive shape as black as a school principal's heart hurtled across the star-spangled sky. I caught a brief flash of razor-sharp teeth, the red glint of a glowing evil eye, and then whatever the thing was landed on the other side of the camp with another colossal BOOFBOOM!

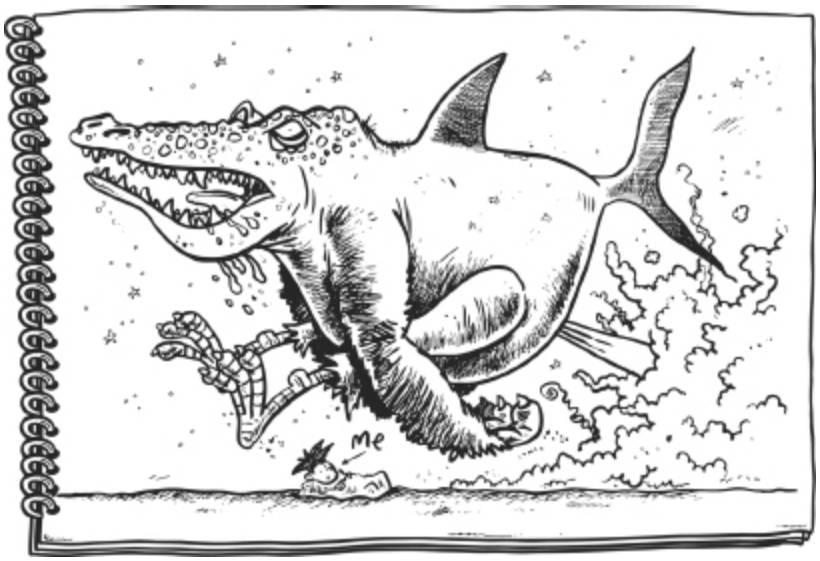
Trembling more than a bobblehead toy on the outstretched palm of a coffee-swilling base jumper with vertigo standing on the top of the Empire State Building in a hurricane, I listened to it thudding across the desert until there was just silence—and a smell.

Oh, man, *what* a smell!

This was a stench from beyond the grave: a stanky, stinky, stenchy pong-o-rama so completely and utterly 110 percent downright *nasty* that my nostrils begged for mercy.

It smelled worse than the dumpster behind Swifty's. Worse than the time I went to the bathroom straight after Miller the Killer had broken the school record for eating chilli enchiladas. Worse than a vat of sixty-year-old rotten eggs and fish heads topped with a layer of used diapers.

Coughing, eyes stinging, heart pounding, I crawled to my bag and, with a trembling hand, took out my sketchbook and started drawing.



CHAPTER 37

PLAYING IT COOL

BY THE TIME I finished the sketch, my heart rate had gone down to a manageable four zillion beats per minute. As I was wondering what to do next, Ellie woke up.

"What's going on?" she said in a sleep-thickened voice.

I decided to play things cool.

No one would believe for a second that a mutant fart-powered giant crocodile had just bounced across the campsite. I'd look like a complete idiot if I said anything.

“Amutantfart-poweredgiantcrocodilejustbouncedacrossthecampsite!” I blurted out.

D’oh.

That playing-it-cool thing is always *way* harder than it seems. I’d lasted all of two nanoseconds.

“Look!” I said, and held out the sketch for Ellie to see. (And before anyone gets all snarky about it being night-time and all “how would anyone be able to see a sketchbook in the dark, huh?”, I was using my otherwise useless phone as a torch. Bet you feel stupid now, hey?)

“Nice drawing,” Ellie mumbled, and lay back down.

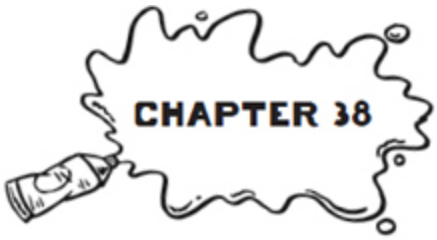
“No! You don’t understand! This thing was RIGHT HERE!”

Ellie yawned and pointed past my shoulder. “You mean like that one?”

I turned to see a giant mutant crocodile standing above me, its drooling jaws and glowing eyes illuminated by the light from my phone.

“Yes,” I said, turning back to Ellie, “exactly like that o—”

The words froze in my throat. A thick spatter of giant crocodile drool hissed as it hit the dying embers of the fire. Directly above my head, the creature’s jaws slowly opened. From my angle it seemed to be smiling. There was a moment’s pause and then, faster than I would have believed possible, the crocodile lunged at me. I opened my mouth to scream but it was too late …



PEEING IS OVERRATED

“RAFE! RAFE!” ELLIE cried out in horror.

The giant crocodile was tossing me around like a toy. I felt the creature’s monstrous jaws clamp onto my arm and …

“RAFE!”

I opened my eyes, expecting to be staring down the throat of the giant mutant croc. Instead, Ellie was bent over me and shaking my arm.

I noticed three things right away:

It was dark.

I was in my swag.

There was no mutant croc.

"What? Hey? Who? Mnaagnaaarghnn," I said.

And no, I don't know what that "Mnaagnaaarghnn" thing was, either. It just sort of came out like that: kind of somewhere between a shriek and a moan. A shroan.

"You were having a nightmare," Ellie said. "It was a pretty big one, judging by all that screaming. You scream like a little girl, by the way. A three-year-old, in fact. I can't believe I'm the only one who woke up."

"Thanks for pointing that out," I said, carefully surveying the camp. The dream had been so *real* that I half-expected the croc to reappear at any second. I reached down and patted myself to check but my legs were still there. I sank back into my swag and closed my eyes.

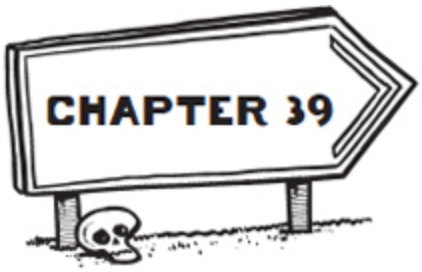
"Wait," Ellie said, punching me on the arm. "You have to come with me."

I opened one eye experimentally. "I do? Where?"

"I need to go pee and I'm not going out there alone." She stood up. "C'mon, be a gentleman."

Sighing, I got to my feet and wrapped the swag around my shoulders. I couldn't blame Ellie for wanting company. It was cold now—real cold—and all that big dark nothing surrounding us looked about as inviting as a haunted castle during a thunderstorm.

Plus, I could probably do with a pee. There had been a moment in my croc nightmare when things could have … Anyway, there's no need for me to go into detail. Let's just say it had been a close call.



THE GROUND KEEPS MOVING

USING MY PHONE as a torch, we walked about two hundred yards from camp until we reached a slight dip in the ground. I would have been happy to pee somewhere *a lot* closer to camp, but Ellie just *had* to pee behind a bush.

"Can I borrow your phone?" Ellie asked.

"Um," I said, immediately spotting the major problem with Ellie's plan. "That means I'll be here in the dark. Alone. And I need to pee too."

"So pee," Ellie said. "Don't be such a wuss." She grabbed my phone before I could argue and scurried behind the bushes.

I bit back what I was going to say. The clouds had rolled in, blocking the starlight and making things pretty dark. I didn't want to pee right next to Ellie, so I walked to a rise in the ground near to a small creek. With a last look to check Ellie was nowhere in sight, I stood on the rise and started peeing. As I was reaching the finish line (you know what I mean), I felt the ground move beneath my feet.

"Whoa!" I said, struggling to keep my balance *and* not pee on my shoes. (Dudes, if you've ever had to pee on a moving train, you'll know how this feels.)

I frowned. Australia wasn't known for earthquakes, was it? But unless Thiago had just *parped* out the world's biggest *parp* I was pretty sure I'd just felt one.

I finished up and turned to see a light coming toward me, the beam from the phone swinging back and forth across the desert floor.

“Ellie?” I said.

“Where are you?” she called.

“Over here on the hill.”

Ellie swung the beam of light in my direction just as the ground moved again.

“You feel that?” I asked.

“Uh, Rafe …”

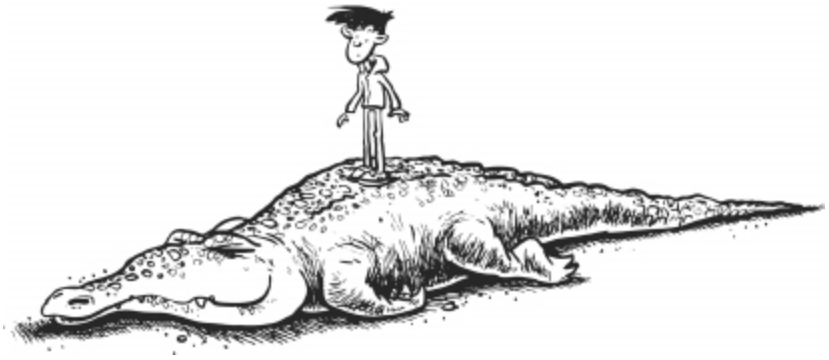
“Like an earth tremor or something,” I said. “Which is kind of weird because I didn’t think you got those in Australia.”

“Rafe,” Ellie said slowly, “don’t panic but …”

“But what?”

“It’s not the ground that’s moving.”

Ellie pointed the beam of light at my feet.



Uh-oh.

WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T WAKE THE CROCODILE

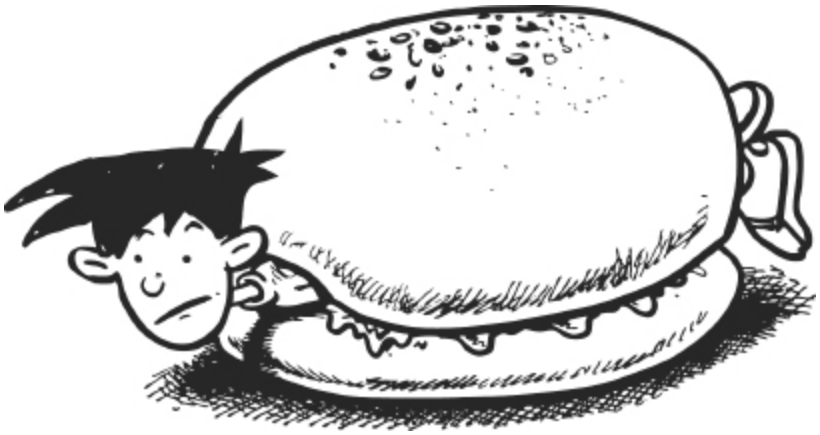
HAVE YOU EVER been told you're standing on a giant crocodile? Didn't think so. Not many people have.

Well, I can now tell you, from practical, firsthand knowledge, that it is not a life experience I'd wish on my worst enemy (well, maybe Miller the Killer or Mrs. Stonecase) or one that I'd like to repeat anytime in, say, the next eight thousand years.

"Don't. Move. A. Muscle," Ellie said quietly.

"*What do you mean 'don't move'?*" I hissed. "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm standing on a giant crocodile!"

"Yes, I *have* noticed that, Rafe, which is more than *you* noticed, so don't get in my face about it!" Ellie hissed back at me. "Besides," she continued (still hissing), "it's a giant *sleeping* crocodile, you doofus—which I'm guessing even you would admit is much, much better than a giant wide-awake croc, right? So, remember, the last thing we want to do is wake the giant crocodile. I've heard these things can move pretty fast. If you jump off, you might stumble, trip on a rock or something, and you'll be croc breakfast before you can say 'bacon roll'. It doesn't even have to eat you. It might just bite off a leg."



I gulped. Ellie had a point—a *good* point. I didn't want to be anyone's breakfast. And I liked my legs just the way they were. No offense to anyone with fewer legs than two. I know there are loads of kids who get along fine with the use of one leg or even no legs—like Taylor Barnes, who lives on the next block to me and scoots around on a neat tricked-out electric wheelchair and played volleyball in the Junior Paralympics and is a Grade-A, all-round cool guy—but I *liked* both of mine. I was used to them and they were used to me.

All of which was useful information but it didn't alter the fact that I WAS STILL STANDING ON A CROCODILE.

The entire time this was going on, I'd been avoiding looking at the crocodile on the (really dumb) basis that what you don't see can't hurt you. I risked a quick glance down and nearly lost it for real.

The thing was *enormous*.

Random Fact #458: Crocodiles are 168 times more dangerous than sharks. Sharks!

Okay, it wasn’t as big as the mutant flying croc in my nightmare but it was still an absolutely freaking *massive* thing full of sharp teeth and strong jaws.

Sharks! 168! How was that even possible?

“What are we going to do?” I whispered, trying and failing to keep the panic out of my voice.

168!

THAT'S THE PLAN?

I WANTED TO burst out crying but two things stopped me. First, Ellie was there and it would be too embarrassing (that's right, folks, R.K. is more afraid of being embarrassed than of being eaten); and, second, it might wake the croc.

Ellie paused.

That wasn't a good sign. I had kind of figured that Ellie, being Ellie, would have some snappy plan at her fingertips. But all I got was a pause. A pause was the last thing I needed.

"Ellie?"

"I'm *thinking*," she said, frowning. "Give me a minute."

Waiting patiently while standing on the back of a sleeping crocodile isn't easy. The seconds ticked past like years.

"Any time," I said. "I'll just wait right here."

"Okay," Ellie said, a determined expression on her face. There was a gleam in her eye that I liked the look of. She was doing a good impression of someone who had just thought of a brilliant idea. This was more like it. I waited to hear her plan, sure that it would be fantastic.

"Run," she said finally. "Really fast."

"Okay, great! I'll … Wait, WHAT?" I said. "Run? That's *it*? That's your big plan?"

"Don't forget the really fast bit," Ellie said. "That's quite an important bit."

"That's the worst plan I've ever heard!" I wanted to scream but, as I still had no wish to become crocodile food, I had to make do with whispering

really, really loud and looking incredibly angry.

"What did you expect me to do?" Ellie hissed (again with the hissing). "Build a helicopter from whatever I can find in this *completely empty desert*? Assemble a tranquilizer crossbow using some rocks and rope made from my hair? Make a—"

"Okay, okay! I get it." I steadied myself. Ellie was right. Kind of. It was the best we were going to come up with. "So I just hop off and run?"

Ellie nodded. "Uh-huh. Fast."

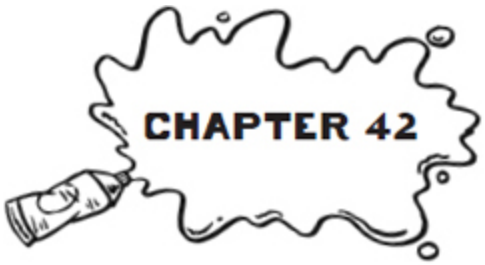
I noticed she'd backed up a few steps, which didn't exactly fill me with confidence. I should point out that, although there had been a weird moment back at Hills Village when I played football for the school (yes, really), I'm not what you'd call "athletic". I mean, I can run when required —and now was one of those times—but I also knew I was more than capable of falling flat on my face. Especially in the dark.

168!

"On the count of three," Ellie said, taking another step back. "One …"

Right then, the crocodile woke up. It made the sort of sound you'd expect a hungry crocodile to make and twisted around to see what was standing on its back.

“Two, three!” I screamed, and leapt out into space.



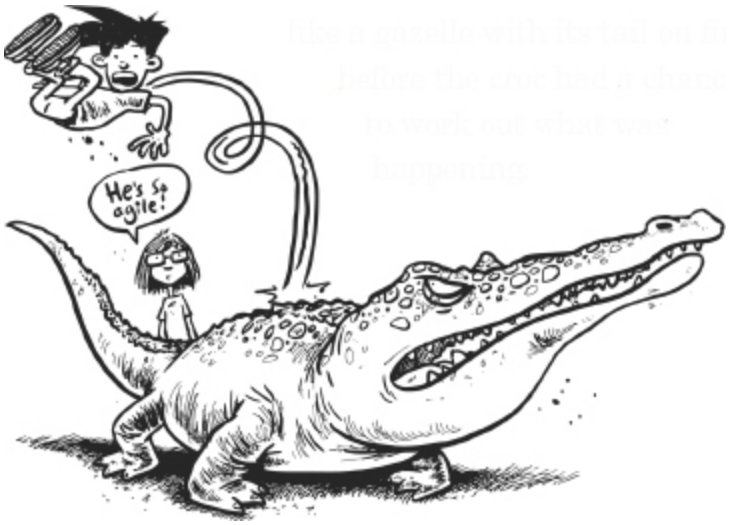
WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T LOOK BACK

I DIDN'T FALL if that's what you're thinking.

I mean, c'mon, if *you* were jumping off the back of a giant crocodile in the dead of night in the middle of the Australian outback, would you fall?

Didn't think so.

I hit the dirt with the precision of a circus trapeze artist and took off like a gazelle with its tail on fire before the croc had a chance to work out what was happening.



"RUN!" I yelled as I sprinted toward Ellie.

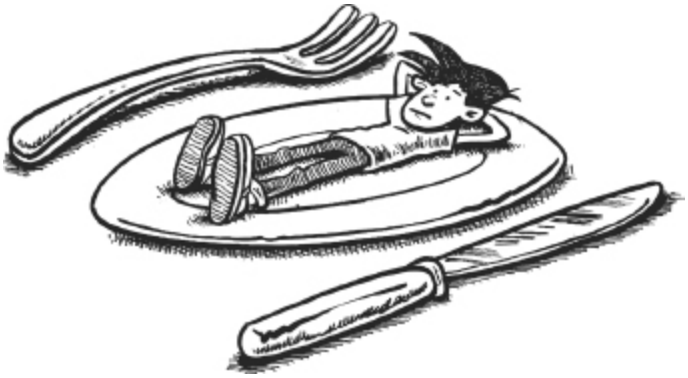
I looked over my shoulder. The croc might have started slow but it had got its bearings now and was coming after us fast.

“It’s catching up!” Ellie yelled. “There’s no way we can run faster than that croc!”

“I know,” I said, putting on a spurt and breezing past her like an Olympic sprinter straining for the tape, “but all I have to do is make sure I run faster than *you*!”

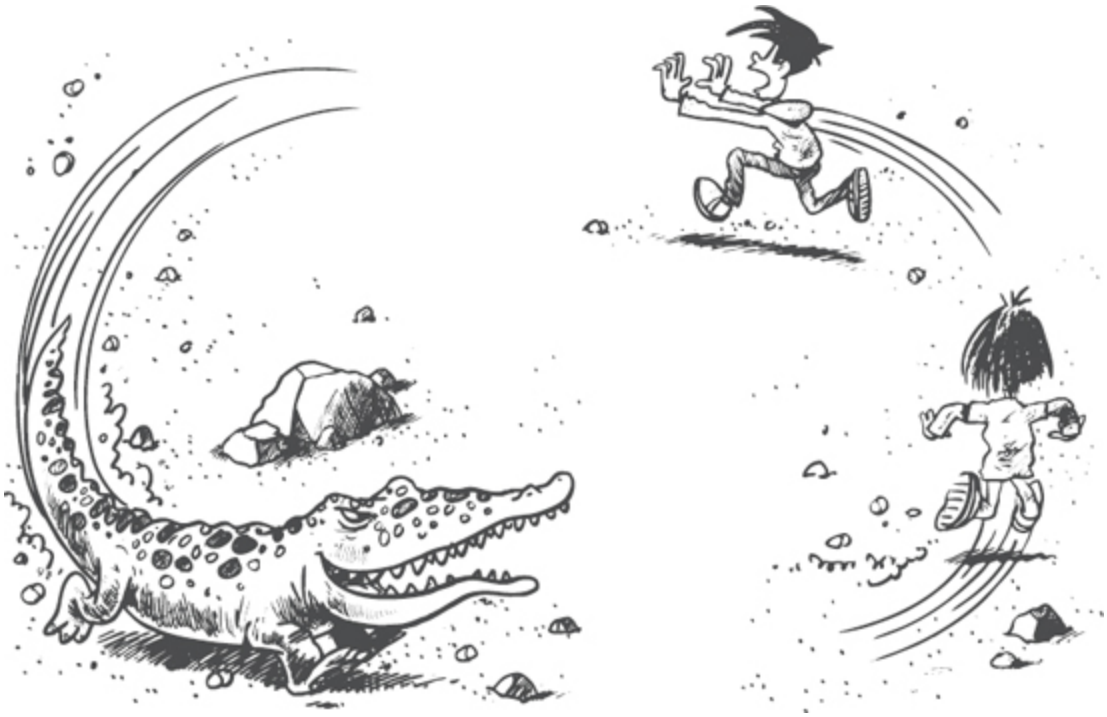
Okay, I admit it, that’s not what I said.

I just wanted to put a joke in there to lighten the mood a little because I have to tell you—being chased by a giant croc is flat-out *depressing*. I mean, there was a stomach-churny excitement like the kind you get when you watch a scary movie, except this *wasn’t* a scary movie. This was all-too-real life … and so mainly I was depressed at the idea of getting eaten.



By now Ellie and I were running as fast as we could side by side, which was about half the speed we needed to go. We had no idea which direction we were moving in and every step we took in the dark increased the chances of tripping over a rock and becoming croc food.

Behind us, the croc lolloped across the dirt, the noise getting louder and louder with every step.



Boofboom, *boofboom*, *boofboom.*

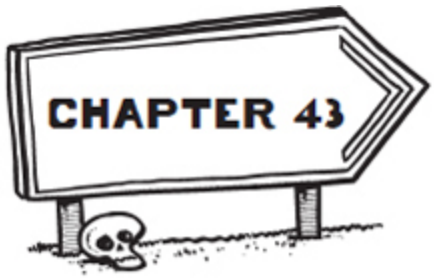
Even though I was panicking like crazy, a tiny part of me felt a little tickle of curiosity. That *boofboom* sound was very close to the sound I'd heard in my nightmare. But how could that be? How could I possibly know what a giant crocodile sounded like?

Unless—and this was a really scary idea—I had heard the croc moving around the campsite while I was sleeping and had somehow mixed that into my nightmare!

I shook the idea out of my head. None of that was helping us right now.

"I don't think I can keep this up much longer," I panted.

Ellie didn’t reply. I didn’t blame her. That joke about only needing to outrun each other wasn’t so funny now. Both of us knew we didn’t have much time left unless something very dramatic happened, and happened soon.



PANT, PANT, CLOSE

AT THE EXACT moment when I thought I couldn't run another step—*BLAM!*—the croc stopped dead in its tracks, like a switch had been pressed.

One second he'd been *boofbooming* after us like crazy, the next he was slinking back to the creek, fading into the darkness with each heavy step.

We jogged to a halt.

"That … was … close," I panted.

My legs felt like they were made of marshmallow. If that croc changed its mind and came back for another run at us, I wouldn't stand a chance.

"No … kidding," Ellie said, gasping for air. "I … thought … we … were … gonners."

A couple of minutes later we had recovered enough to think about getting back to Kamp Kulture.

Ellie suggested we head away from the creek and go around in a big circle. She seemed to have a better idea about where the camp was, and it wasn't like I was going to disagree with any suggestion that took us *away* from the croc.

"Let's make it a really big circle," I said. "Like, a *really*, really big one."

As far as Rafe Khatchadorian was concerned, we could go via Mars if it meant not risking a close encounter of the croc kind.

We walked in silence for a while, both of us (probably) thinking about our near miss.

"You'd think McGarrity would have warned us about the croc," I said eventually. "I mean, he might be a bit of a blowhard but he wouldn't want us to actually get eaten, would he?"

"You know," Ellie said, "I've never heard of a crocodile being somewhere like this."

"Uh, isn't Australia full of crocodiles?"

Ellie shook her head. "That's just it. Even here in the Northern Territory, they're mainly near the coast up in the north. If crocs are around, there are warning signs. Usually."

"I didn't see anything like that," I said. "On the drive here we—"

"Shh!" Ellie said, dragging me to the ground. "Look."

She pointed to her left, at lights on the horizon. They were very faint but definitely there. It could only be one thing.

Aliens.

ALIENS SHMALIENS

"ALIENS?" ELLIE SAID, arching an eyebrow at me.

I could tell from her tone that she didn't think I was right.

"Uh, maybe," I said. "It's possible."

"Nah," Ellie said. "It's definitely not that. Let's take a closer look."

As we got to the top of a rise in the ground, we saw that the lights were heading toward a rock formation. The lights were too far away to see properly but I could tell it was probably a car or a truck—not aliens.

"I thought there was nothing much out here," I said.

Ellie pointed to our right. "That's not all."

There were more lights coming from what looked like a crack in the ground. These lights were nearer but had been hidden from view until we'd shifted position. Maybe these were the aliens. I was still pretty sure aliens might be out here.

We moved quietly to the edge of a ravine which formed a long V-shaped clearing. In the middle of the clearing was a large, shiny trailer; the kind of thing Tom Cruise would have on a movie set. Not that I'd ever been

on a movie set, unless you counted my experience with Ellie and The Outsiders (pick up a copy of *Rafe's Aussie Adventure* for details), but I was sure this trailer would fit right in.

Two cars with tinted windows and white logos on the doors were parked at angles to the trailer. Behind the trailer was a large rectangular box under a tarpaulin. Ellie pulled out my phone and snapped a couple of photos, taking care to turn off the flash. Outside the trailer, talking in low voices and sitting on lounge chairs around a campfire, were four men. Two were dressed in black fleece jackets but could still be easily recognized as a couple of the suits from the reception at the Bigbottom Creek Hotel the other night. Both of them wore sunglasses.

The other two men were Brushes and Vern.

Brushes leaned back in his lounge chair and swirled the ice in his glass before taking a long, satisfied pull. He stretched his feet a little closer to the fire and wiggled his toes.

"So much for roughing it," Ellie murmured. "The big phony."

"I don't get it," I whispered back. "Why all the secrecy?"

"And why are those blokes out here?" Ellie said. "They don't exactly look like the outdoors type."

We sat for a few minutes, wondering what to do next.

"Should we head back to camp?" I said.

It was a bit of an anticlimax after the crocodile chase and alien lights, but it wasn't like these guys were doing anything wrong. And if Brushes McGarrity *was* a big phony, well, that was kind of annoying and all, but it didn't mean we had to *do* anything about it. Sometimes there isn't a big bang at the end of a story, just a long walk back to your swag, hoping you don't bump into any more crocs.

CHAPTER 45

ON THE PLUS SIDE, NO ONE GOT EATEN

I GUESS WE *could* have gone to Brushes McGarrity's luxury compound and told him all about the croc, but that didn't seem right. I don't know, the whole set-up was so downright suspicious that, without Ellie or me saying a word, we both knew we weren't going to get a sympathetic ear from *that* direction. Besides, it was dark out there.

When we got back to Kamp Kulture, we decided that one of us would stay awake for a couple of hours and keep watch, then swap over.

"I'll go first," I said, kind of hoping Ellie would put up an argument.

She didn't.

"Okay," she said, and went straight to sleep.

D'oh.

I rubbed my face and did my best to get my sentry head on.

I did a loop around the campfire, found a rock to lean against, and …

… woke up feeling like someone had taken out my brain. For a few seconds I didn’t know *who* I was, let alone where and why.

“Nice job, Sleeping Beauty,” Ellie said, as she came into view. She put her hands on her hips and looked down at me like I was something unpleasant she couldn’t scrape off her shoe. “Weren’t you supposed to keep watch and then wake me up?”

What could I say?

I’d meant to stay awake, honest. On the plus side, no one had been eaten.

CHAPTER 46

BAAAAAAAAAACON!

“WAKEY, WAKEY! RISE and shine, campers!” Brushes shouted.

Behind him, Vern was making so much noise cooking that Brushes had to shout louder than he normally did, which meant he was about as loud as a fighter-jet engine.

One by one, the bleary-eyed Kampers staggered to their feet.

“Today’s the day you lucky, lucky people get to see the McGarrity Cave Paintings—the best cave paintings in the whole of Australia!” Brushes continued.

An incredible smell of bacon wafted over from where Vern was cooking.

Baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaacon.

Despite how tired I was, that stuff smelled *good*, but then you'd have to be in a coma not to love the smell of bacon in the morning. I wondered if the vegetarians in our group felt the same way. Probably not.

Anyway, whatever, who cares? It was a big improvement on the mouldy vegemite back at Bigbottom Creek, and I was going to wrap my mouth around as much of the stuff as I could get. Especially since, from what Brushes was saying, we were getting back on the bus. I was hoping these cave paintings were real close to camp but, in a place the size of Australia, you never knew.

"Awwch, noooo," growled a shapeless lump of green cloth over to my right. It sounded like Glen wasn't too happy about being woken up. I doubted there'd be any poems about rainbows and lollipops coming from his direction today.

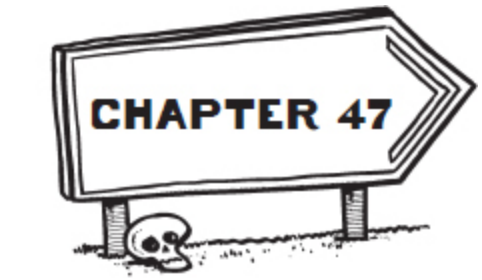
About an hour after waking up we were all aboard the bus, clutching our various bits of art gear as the events of the previous night began to fade.

I took a large sketchbook and some pastels. A couple of the others—Vloot and Thiago—did the same while tiny Monique hauled out a thick wad of paper. Ellie had her trusty video camera around her neck. Denny took a remote satellite transmitter and laptop and was planning to live-blog the whole thing right from the caves. Yrsa had a violin and a neat sound recorder—she was going to tape the noises inside the caves and use them in a composition. Linda had a special "toolbox" with a ton of empty drawers she was going to fill with colored dirt, leaves, bits of rock, and anything else she could use in her ceramics. Eric carried a huge bag of wool. I had no idea what he was planning but he looked like he knew what he was doing. Glen had the least to carry—just a chewed-up pencil and a battered black notebook.

Suddenly, I realized something—*this* was why I was here.

These were the kinds of people I wanted to be around. It was all cool. It was all fun. I felt like a proper art student.

I felt creative.



WELCOME TO McGARRITYLAND

UP AHEAD, A red hill stuck up straight out of the flat desert like a pimple. Brushes pulled the bus off the road and we bumped along a winding track through a bunch of weird-looking boulders.

“There she blows,” Brushes shouted. He pointed out the window at a sharp black slice cut into the big red rock. “The McGarrity Caves!”

“Are they called that?” I asked Denny. “Officially, I mean.”

“That’s what *he* calls them,” Denny said. “But it’s a dead cert they were called something else before Brushes came along.”

Denny opened his laptop.

“There you go,” he said, reading from the screen. “This place used to be part of the traditional lands. The caves belonged to the local Aboriginal people, not blow-ins like McGarrity.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Why aren’t the cave paintings named after *them*?”

“Good question,” Denny said. “They’re long gone from around here.” He sounded different—a bit harder somehow. “They were chased away when they found valuables in the ground.”

“There’s gold here?”

Denny looked back at his laptop. “Not sure. It doesn’t say exactly what was mined but, whatever it was, it all ran out long ago,” he said. “Too late for the locals even if they did come back.”

“We’re here,” Ellie said.

“What does it matter if we’re here?” Denny snapped. “The real owners of the land don’t care if we’re—”

“No,” Ellie said. “I mean, we’re *here*.”

Denny and I looked up to see Brushes pulling the bus to a stop outside the cave entrance.

CHAPTER 48

RAFE KHATCHADORIAN, SPELUNCAPHOBIC

"IT'S COLDER THAN a Canberra July down there, so you better put on your jackets," Brushes warned us. "Once you get below ground, the temperature drops right quick and no mistake. Now, is everyone ready to see the best cave art in the whole of Australia?"

I swallowed hard.

There was something I hadn't told him or anyone else. It was something I'd been worrying about ever since I'd got that letter inviting me on the camp, something I'd shoved right down to the back of my mind and not thought about—until now.

I don't like caves.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not claustrophobic. I'm fine in elevators or closets or whatever. No, it's real specific. There's even a name for it.

I mean, I'm not *nutty* about it. I don't freak out or start screaming or anything, but as we approached the narrow gap in the rock wall, I felt a cold globule of fear trickle down my spine. Close up, the cave looked about as inviting as a shark's mouth, and I wasn't keen to accept the invitation.

What if the whole thing collapsed on us?

What if we got trapped inside?

What if I got lost and spent the rest of my life looking for the way out by feeling my way through inky blackness until my strength gave out and I tried to climb the walls but slipped and got wedged upside down in a crevasse, screaming and screaming but there's no one there?

Okay, maybe I'm getting carried away, but there's always some guy getting trapped upside down in a cave in the news.

They *always* get trapped upside down too. No idea why, it's just what happens. *I* didn't want to be trapped upside down in a cave. I didn't even want to be *in* the cave. But there was no going back now, not unless I wanted to look like a total yellowbelly in front of Ellie and the rest of them.

"Not an option," Leo said.

I looked at him. "Who asked you?"

"You did."

CHAPTER 49

BLOOD CAVE 3: REVENGE OF THE GHOST CAVE

BRUSHES STOPPED IN front of the cave entrance and gathered us around in a semicircle. “Okay, blokes and blokesses, this first part is a bit of a fair dinkum squeezeroo. It’ll get stickier than a pollie’s beak about twenty yards in, but unless you’re a total drongo with a few kangaroos loose in the top paddock, you shouldn’t cark it, so I don’t want to see any of you going off like a frog in a sock, right?”

I understood about six words of that.

Ellie leaned over. “He says the gap gets tight in there but you won’t die unless you’re an idiot. Oh, and don’t panic.”

“What about the kangaroos?” I asked.

“Forget the kangaroos.”

“Now,” Brushes said, while waving to Vern to come closer, “you’re going to need these.”

Vern opened the large bag he was carrying and handed us orange hard hats with LED torches attached. We put them on and I looked around at the group, laughing and taking photos of each other. I guessed no one else was speluncaphobic.

“Cheer up,” Ellie said. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I did that thing with your mouth where you smile but the person looking at you knows you’re not really smiling. And the reason was that Ellie was almost right. I hadn’t seen a ghost but I’d watched this scene before—a bunch of laughing kids heading into a cave—and I knew exactly how it ended. It was a late-night flick I’d secretly watched on my computer about six months back and immediately regretted. The McGarrity Caves looked exactly like the cave in *Blood Cave 3*.

And we were going in.

We followed Brushes to the cave entrance with Vern waving as we went. He was too big to fit through the entrance. Lucky Vern.

Brushes went in first, turning sideways and disappearing into the darkness, his torch flickering across the cave walls. The rest of the group went in one by one while I hung back. It wasn’t until everyone was almost inside that I realized I’d forgotten something very important.

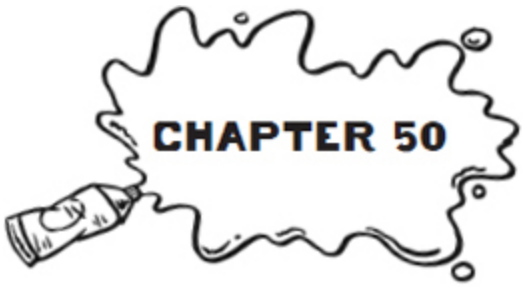
I couldn’t be the last in line. No freakin’ way!

Everyone *knows* that in any horror movie the kid at the end of the line is the one who cops it first. It doesn’t matter where they are—in the jungle, haunted house, abandoned fairground, whatever—they’re a surefire goner.

It was right up there with volunteering to go outside to check what that weird noise was, or suggesting everyone splits up, or putting your face right up close to a darkened window … all things that, in the movies, meant you were for the chop.

Scary Movie Rule #1: Don’t be last in line.

I sprinted forward, elbowed Monique out of the way (which I kind of felt bad about but not bad enough to stop me from doing it … *If* we survived I’d apologize to her afterwards), and slid sideways into McGarrity’s Cave.

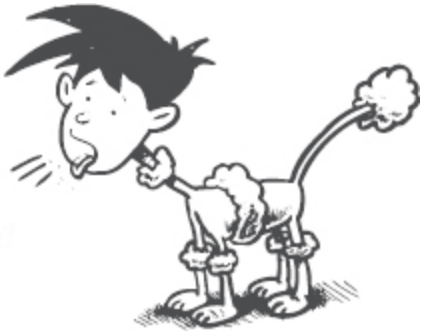


THE STICKY BIT

THE INSIDE OF the cave wasn't as bad as I'd thought it would be.

It was much, much, *much* worse.

For one thing, it was way darker. It was like being the filling in some giant sandwich. The light from the torch kept bouncing off the rock wall and into my eyes, which meant that I was pretty much blind. My heart was beating real quick and my breathing was shallow. I sounded like an asthmatic poodle. I'd only taken about three steps and I already felt trapped. What was it going to be like further in?



I tried to be braver, or at least act braver (which I've noticed are pretty much the same thing), and inched along. (Do people "inch" in Australia? They have the decimal system here, so maybe they don't.) We centimetred along. Is that better?

I shuffled sideways, the rock walls getting closer and closer until it seemed impossible to go any further.

"Okay, mates," Brushes called from up ahead, "this is the sticky bit."

This is the sticky bit? I thought. How can this nightmare get any worse?

"Everyone drop to the ground and crawl," Brushes instructed. "The ceiling gets pretty low about here."

Okay, that's how it could get worse.

Now I was regretting letting Monique go last.

It meant I couldn't get out even if I wanted to—not unless Monique went with me, and even I wasn't going to be that much of a coward. Not with Ellie there. I dropped to the ground and started crawling.

The cave seemed to shrink to nothing and the tops of our helmets began to scrape against the roof as we crawled forward. I could feel the ground sloping away and I had to dig in with my elbows to stop from sliding.

Directly ahead of me, the soles of Eric's feet scrabbled along the tunnel floor. Everyone was very quiet as we crawled and crawled and crawled for what seemed like forever.

It wasn't funny anymore.

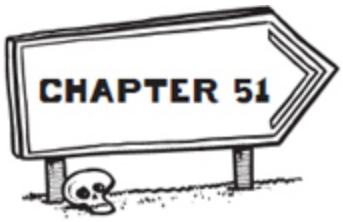
I was going to die in here. This was it for Rafe Khatchadorian.

I might not be dangling upside down but I knew that we were all going to get wedged in this impossibly narrow cave tunnel and …

… just like that, like so many candy bars dropping through a slot, we popped out of the tunnel. I landed facedown in a patch of dust and began sneezing.

"Wow," I heard Ellie say.

I sneezed one last time and looked up.



DOUBLE AWESOME WITH SPRINKLES ON TOP

I STOOD UP, dusted off the worst of the dirt, and looked around.

"Not too shabby, eh?" Brushes said. He spread his arms out wide. There was no mistaking his pride. It was like he owned the place. Maybe he did. I was a bit sketchy on the land ownership laws in the remote areas of Australia—or anywhere, really. He was right, though. This place was not in any way shabby.

We stood at the base of a towering cavern dotted with pillars of sandstone that reached up to the cave roof, which glittered as our torch beams crisscrossed over it. It was double awesome with sprinkles on top. And strawberry sauce.

For a few seconds we all just stood and stared.

Vloot said something in Dutch before switching to English. "Gold?" he said, pointing at the ceiling.

Brushes shook his head and smiled. "No, Clogs"—(Brushes had nicknamed all of us in tasteless ways like that. Vloot was Clogs, Yrsa was the Snow Queen … you get the picture)—"that's iron pyrites, better known as fool's gold. Looks pretty, hey? But it's totally worthless."

"There used to be gold here, though, right?" Denny asked. "Before the British came?"

"I don't know anything about that," Brushes said, his smile vanishing faster than a snowflake on a barbecue grill. He turned and walked across the cavern. "This way."

Denny glanced at me and Ellie and raised his eyebrows.

Brushes stopped at the far wall of the cavern. He took a lantern from his pack and switched it on. "Can you all turn your head torches off?" he said.

“These cave paintings are light-sensitive.”

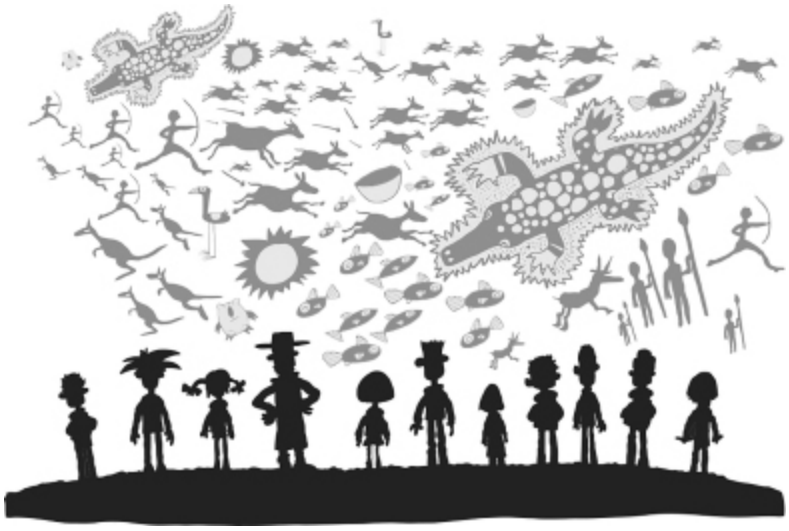
We did as he asked, leaving the cavern bathed in a soft, warm glow. Brushes walked the lantern a few paces to his left and placed it on the floor.

“Behold the McGarrity Paintings!” Brushes stood back as the lantern lit up the cavern wall.

This time it was my turn to say “wow”.

THERE'S ALWAYS ONE

THE CAVERN WALL was absolutely full of paintings and patterns drawn and scratched into the surface. It was easy to make out images of various animals. I looked meaningfully at Ellie when I saw an enormous crocodile picked out in white, and hunters throwing spears or running. There were some symbols in there—things I couldn't recognize. It was amazing.



"It all looks so fresh!" Ellie said.

Brushes nodded. "That's the atmospheric pressure down here. It's beaut for preserving everything just as they did it twenty thousand years ago."

"Twenty *thousand* years?" I said.

Beside me there was a chorus of "oohs" and "aahs". People took out their cameras and sketchbooks, and Brushes kept up a commentary on the

paintings while we got busy.

I began to wonder if I had been a bit hard on old Brushes. The cave paintings *were* totally awesome. Twenty thousand years! Even Grandma Dotty wouldn't remember that far back (if you're reading this, G.D., I'm only joking).

"You've got about thirty minutes," Brushes said. "Just being here can affect the pigments in the paintings. Any longer and we risk destroying them with the carbon dioxide in our breath. That's why I need you all to stay well back."

Brushes sounded a lot less like an Aussie bushman and more like an Aussie professor. We settled in and did our thing.

After about twenty minutes, I noticed Thiago moving closer and closer to the wall. He seemed real interested in a painting of some kind of antelope. When he was about an arms length from the cave wall, I saw him frown.

"HEY!" Brushes yelled, his voice echoing off the cavern walls, making about half of us drop our pencils. "Get back!"

Thiago gave a short, high-pitched

, leapt about two feet in the air, and scooted back to the rest of us, his hands held up in apology. “I—”

“Let’s go!” Brushes yelled, cutting the little farty Brazilian short. “Right now!” He began making shooing motions like we were a herd of badly behaved sheep. “There’s always one who ruins things for everyone else! Pack up your stuff, we’re heading back to camp!”

SNIFFING ANTELOPE BUTT

"NICE GOING, THIAGO," DENNY SAID, knocking him with his shoulder as he passed.

To be honest, leaving the cavern was sort of okay with me. I mean, the paintings were like triple-super-cool and all but we were still in *Blood Cave 3*. We packed up our stuff and walked back to the crawl tunnel.

With one last angry glance at Thiago, Brushes scrambled up. "Everyone follow me," he said, and headed into the tunnel. "Move it!" His feet disappeared and, one by one, the rest of the group slipped in behind him.

In a couple of minutes it was my turn. As I started moving, I felt a hand on my arm.

It was Thiago.

He put a finger to his lips and motioned for me to follow him, dragging me away from the mouth of the tunnel.

"What are you doing?" I hissed. I shook my head and stopped dead. Thiago held my arm firmly. For a little guy, he sure had a strong grip.

"*Come*," he said, and began pulling me back to the cave paintings.

I glanced at the tunnel. Everyone else had gone.

Thiago kept tugging my arm.

"Okay, okay!" I said. "But make this quick."

We ran across the empty cavern to the cave paintings. With everyone else gone, the place seemed even bigger and way spookier.

"This is *so* bad," I said. I could almost see Mrs. Stricker's face as I showed up back at Hills Village Middle School, having been booted out of Australia in disgrace for destroying one of their cultural treasures.

"See," Thiago said, beckoning me over to the antelope drawing.

"What?" Close up, the drawing looked even better but I still couldn't see why old Thiago was getting so worked up. I shrugged. "I don't get it."

Thiago rolled his eyes and pointed to his nose and then at the antelope's butt. He made a sniffing sound.

I bent my head to the antelope’s butt and sniffed.

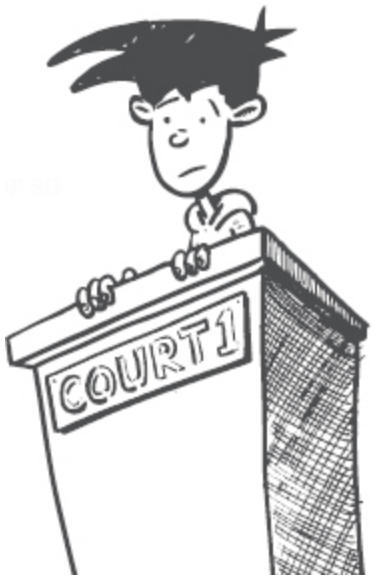
SPILL THE BEANS

“WHAT KEPT YOU two so long?”

Brushes glared at me and Thiago as we wriggled out of the cave, blinking against the glare of the sun. I was kind of glad I was all squinty because otherwise I’m pretty sure Brushes would have spotted how guilty I was right away.

“I got stuck in the tunnel,” I said. “Thiago was behind me so …”

I didn’t sound too convincing, even to me. Thiago said something in Portuguese, which went on for so long that Brushes eventually made a kind of *gah!* noise and stalked off to the bus. Thiago turned to me and winked. I was beginning to like Thiago. Apart from the farting, obvs.



“What was *that* all about?” Ellie said once we were all back on the bus.

She, along with Denny, me, and Thiago, occupied the two back rows. It was even bumpier and smellier back there but it was as far away from Brushes and Vern as we could get.

At the front of the bus, Brushes seemed to be concentrating on his driving, although I did see his eyes flick up to his rear-view mirror more than a couple of times. I half-turned in my seat so he couldn’t see my face.

“Thiago noticed something funny down there,” I whispered.

“What do you mean by ‘funny’?” Denny asked.

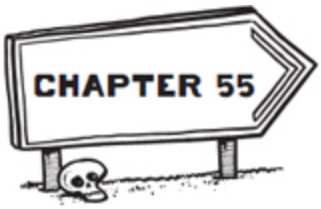
Ellie punched my arm. “Spill.”

I looked at Thiago, who nodded as if to say “go right ahead, tell ’em”.

I hesitated. Did I *really* want to get into all this? My last visit to Australia had ended badly partly because I’d stuck my nose where it wasn’t wanted. Was I really going to do exactly the same thing again?

It turned out I was.

“Okay,” I said, leaning in closer to Ellie and Denny. “Listen up.”



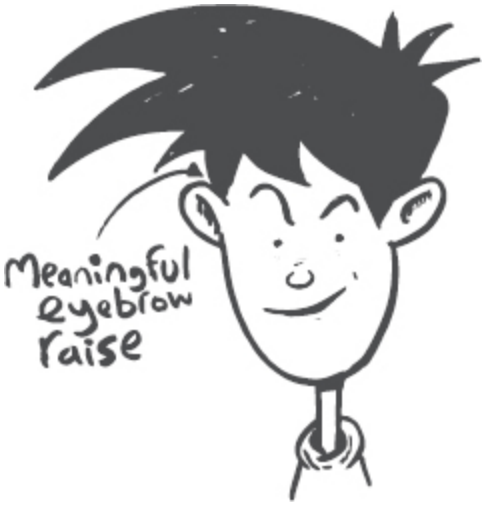
NO PLACE TO BE ENEMIES

I PUT ON my ultra-serious face. “The antelope’s butt smelled of paint.”

“So?” Denny said. “What’s wrong with the painting smelling of paint? I mean, it is a *paint*-ing, right?”

I raised my eyebrows and waited for the penny to drop. Sure enough, after a second or two, Denny’s eyebrows shot up to match mine.

“*Oh*,” he said, louder than I liked. “The painting shouldn’t smell of paint—”



“Because it’s supposed to be twenty thousand years old,” Ellie said, completing Denny’s thought.

“Exactly,” I said, sitting back.

“*The paintings are fake!*” Denny hissed. He was bouncing around in his seat and it wasn’t just because we were driving across a dried-up creek bed. He slapped his hand on the back of my seat. “I *knew* there was something weird about that guy!”

I glanced at Ellie, who was sitting quite still. “What’s up?”

“I don’t know …” she said. “It’s a pretty big thing to accuse Brushes of faking the paintings.”

I looked at her like she was nuts. “What else could it be? Anyway, I’m not accusing Brushes. Not yet. Not until we’ve figured something out.”

“What’s that?” Denny said.

“*Why* he faked them,” I said.

“*If* he faked them,” Ellie corrected. “Maybe they were fading away and he was worried they’d disappear. Still bad, I know, but different to faking the whole thing.”

I opened my mouth to argue and then closed it again.

Ellie was right. Brushes’ crime might be vandalism, not forgery. There was a big difference. Now I was A Man of Experience, I knew that it paid to pick who you fight—and where.

I looked out of the bus window. That was the thing about the outback—there was plenty of space to hide things, plenty of space to get lost. We were a long way from home out here.

It was no place to be making enemies.

CHAPTER 56

A WHOLE NEW CROC-SHAPED WORRY

WE GOT BACK to Kamp Kulture in the middle of the afternoon, hot, dusty, and tired. While Vern started setting up for dinner, Brushes took the rest of us off to a nearby billabong.

Okay, I admit I didn't know what a billabong was until we got there. For those of you who also don't know, a billabong is kind of a swimming hole in a creek—the bit where the water is nice and shallow. The one Brushes took us to was a cool pool of blue water with a few green trees (the only green thing for miles around) bending toward its surface. It looked great … apart from one tiny detail.

"Go swimming?" I gulped.

I'd been swimming in Australia before and it hadn't turned out so well. That time it was sharks that I'd mainly been worrying about (although it turned out I should have been more worried about losing my shorts). Now I had a whole new croc-shaped worry.

"That's the idea, Texas," Brushes said.

I ignored him and glanced at Ellie. "Uh, I don't think that's a good idea," I said. "What about crocodiles?"

Brushes laughed. "There aren't any crocs around here!"

This was the moment. We *had* to tell him about the big croc we'd seen. Even if we did have our doubts about Brushes and his whole cave painting scam, we couldn't let the other kids become croc snacks without saying *something*. Other than Glen, who'd started feeling sick on the bus ride back from the caves, everyone else was busy changing into their swimming gear. I knew if we didn't tell Brushes soon, things could get pretty ugly out there and that blue water might start turning red.

"Actually," I said, "that's not strictly true."

Brushes glowered at me. "What?"

"We saw one last night," I said. "I, uh, needed to pee and so did Ellie. While we were out there, well, like I say, that's when we saw one. A croc, that is."

For some reason I didn't mention I'd been *standing* on the back of the croc having a pee when I'd noticed. I don't know, out in the cold light of day—or even the baking hot sun of mid-afternoon—not noticing when you're standing on the back of a three-ton croc seems a little dumb.

"You sure about this?" Brushes said. His voice got even growlier than usual. It sounded like he'd been chewing sandpaper. "It's real dark out

there, mate. Your mind plays tricks. A foreign kid like you might have confused old Crocodile Rocks with an actual crocodile."

I shook my head. "Uh, nuh, nope, it was definitely a—"

"You know, Brushes might be right, Rafe," Ellie said. "We could have mistaken Crocodile Rocks for a real one. We don't want to get into a *boxing* match about this, right?"

"Yes, that's ri—*What?*" I said, doing a double take. I stared at Ellie in disbelief. Was she completely nuts? I'd been *standing* on the back of the croc right in front of her! We'd been chased through the desert about ten snappy feet away from being croc chow! "There's no way we—"

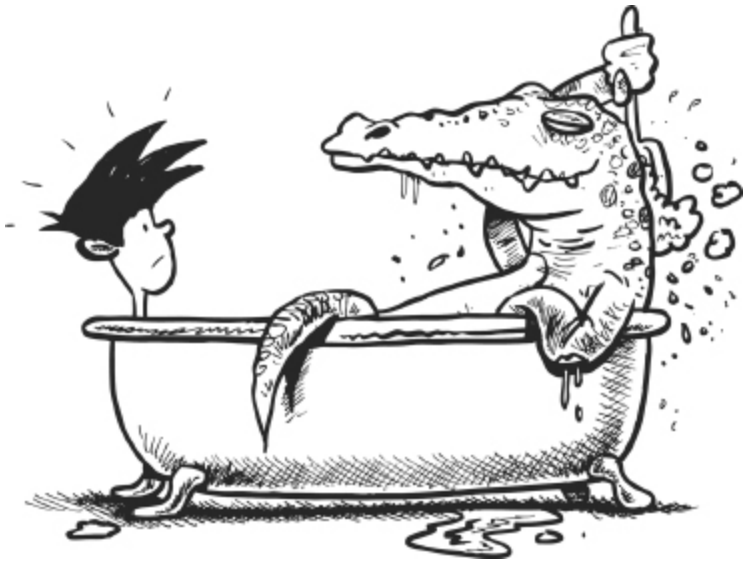
And then, midway through my sentence, my mouth closed like a slammed door.

I'd figured out why Ellie was lying.

CHAPTER 57

RAFE FIGURES IT OUT: RAFE FIGURES IT OUT

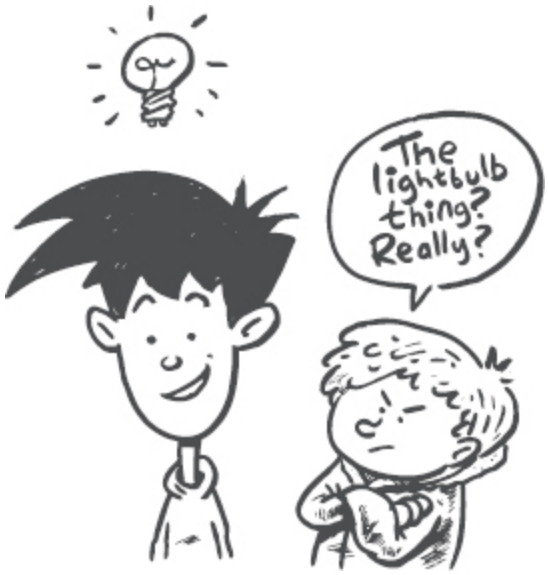
EVERYONE WENT SWIMMING apart from me and Glen. Even though I was now 100 percent sure that the big croc that had chased us last night definitely wouldn't show up, I still didn't like the idea of dipping so much as a Khatchadorian toe in an Australian bathtub.



With Brushes watching me far too closely for me to talk properly to Ellie, I sat on a rock in the shade of the tree as the others splashed about, and tried to get my thoughts in some kind of order, which was kind of like trying to make a scale model of the Sydney Opera House out of soup. I picked up a pebble and tossed it back and forth from hand to hand. After a while, I put the pebble in my pocket. I decided it was going to be my lucky pebble from now on because I had figured it all out …

Later on, when all this was over, I found out that it's a big no-no to take *anything* from sacred Indigenous land—even a pebble. I didn't know at the time. I just thought it was a regular pebble.

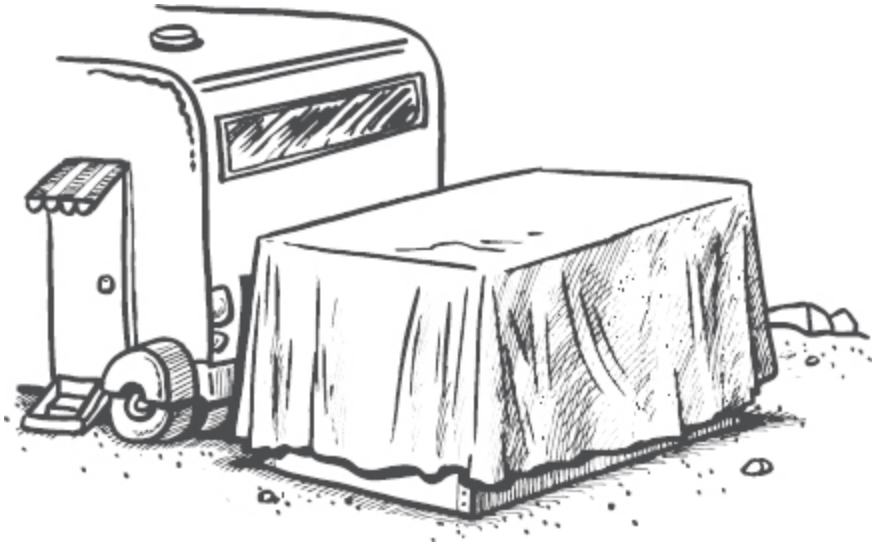
The clue to how I knew Ellie was lying about the croc was when she said she didn't want the talk between Brushes and me to become "a boxing match". That didn't sound like something Ellie would usually have said and, just as I had been about to start an argument about the croc with Brushes, what she was trying to tell me hit me.



The box.

THE KID WHO COULD

YOU KNOW THAT feeling when you're trying to think of something and it's right on the tip of your tongue, only you can't quite squeeze it out? *That* was what this was, except that when Ellie said the word "boxing" I did remember. I remembered the box.



The box was something that had been tickling my brain bone ever since I'd seen it behind Brushes' secret trailer, and it looked like it had been doing the same to Ellie.

If we'd got it right, the whole thing went something like this:

1. If Brushes *was* up to something dodgy in the caves, even he wouldn't risk the lives of all the Young Artists in a creek where there was a

chance of a crocodile …

2. … which meant that Brushes knew—not guessed—that the crocodile was nowhere to be seen because …

3. … the croc was safely tucked up in the box behind the trailer.

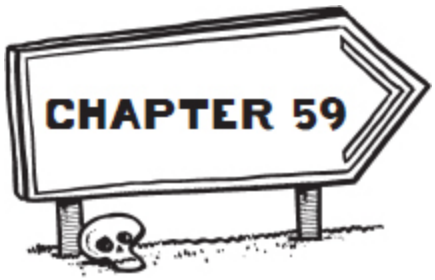
I totally get that all of this stuff could easily have been me putting two and two together and coming up with 76.3, but it just *felt* like I was right. Haven't you had that feeling before? Like there isn't a real solid logical reason you know something but it doesn't matter because you just *know*.

That was what it was like for me, sitting there under the shade of a coolabah tree.* I *knew*.

Despite the heat, I felt a little shiver of excitement. Because Brushes was letting everyone swim without worrying, I knew that something fishier than a truckload of sardines was going on. It had to do with the cave paintings and the croc and the dudes in business suits and shades, and with those mystery lights out at Crocodile Rocks.

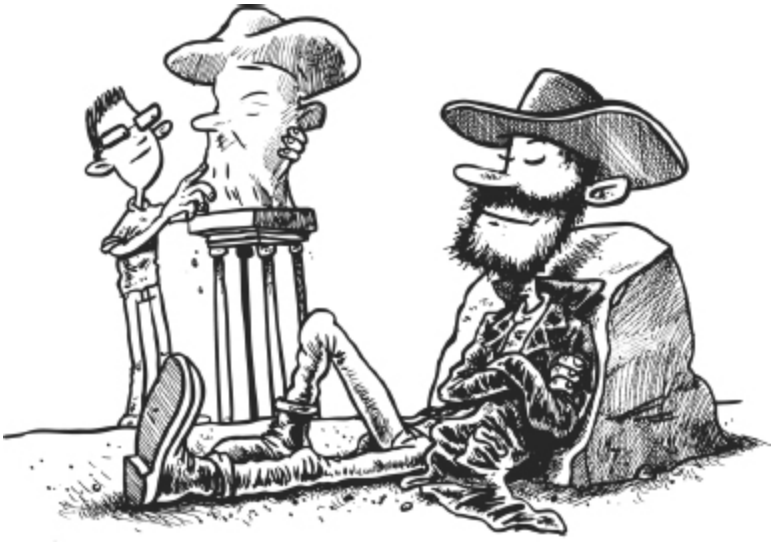
The only question was *what*, exactly. I felt like there was a big, really complicated jigsaw laid out in front of me with the important pieces there … but all in the wrong place. I needed information from the outside world if Rafe Khatchadorian, ace detective, was going to crack the Case of the Vanishing Croc wide open. And since we were stuck out here for another week, it didn't look likely that I'd be able to find out anything.

But I knew a kid who could.



BIG HEAD

THAT EVENING, EVERY time Ellie and I looked up from talking, we'd find Brushes glancing at us from underneath his face fungus. Time dragged, mainly because Brushes decided to "encourage creativity" by getting Vloot to make a clay bust … using Brushes as a model.



"Man, that bloke's got a big head," Denny whispered.

He and Ellie and I were sitting with our backs against a rock with our feet pointed toward the fire.

"I don't know," I said, peering at Vloot's sculpture. "I think it looks about right."

"*No*," Denny said, "I mean he fancies his chances. Only a big head would get someone to make a statue of himself, right?"

It wasn’t exactly a statue but Denny was right. There was something kind of odd about the whole thing.

“I don’t think Vloot wanted to do it, either,” Ellie said. “I heard Brushes sort of *insisting*. Weird.”

Brushes might have stayed at the camp forever if it hadn’t been for Glen and His Exploding Butt. Remember I told you Glen hadn’t been feeling too good on the bus back to camp? Well, things got a whole lot worse for poor Glen, who had a bad case of Exploding Butt (don’t worry, his butt didn’t explode anywhere near us. There will be no exploding butt pictures), which meant Vern had to take him back to civilization.

Vern scooped Glen into the bus and set off for Bigbottom Creek. I wasn’t all that sure that being back at Bigbottom Creek would be much of an improvement, but I guess Glen would only be a short sprint from a bathroom. To be honest, I wasn’t worried about Glen. He came from a country that ate deep-fried chocolate bars and haggis. He’d be fine.

Once Vern had gone, Brushes went through his old stretch-and-yawn routine before heading out of camp to what he told us (again) was a patch of bare ground … but which we knew was a fifty-foot *LuxCamp* G6 "Executive Range" air-conditioned trailer hidden in a secret ravine.

With Brushes and Vern out of the picture, and all the other Kamp Kulture kids bedding down for the night, it was time at last for my super-secret spy network to spring into action.

CHAPTER 60

SUPER-SECRET SPY NETWORK

MY SUPER-SECRET spy network was called Denny.

I mean, Denny was right there with his access to the net and everything. In about ten minutes flat he'd got all the information we needed.

"This is the photo Ellie took of the logo on the side of the cars at the ravine," he said. "The image wasn't clear enough, but I've cleaned it up."

Denny zoomed in on the words on a banner underneath the logo.

"MegaGlobal Industries," he said. "It's the second-largest mining operation in the world. And here's where it gets really interesting: MegaGlobal owns Crocodile Rocks, which used to have a diamond mine operating there about thirty years back. There were a bunch of rumours about Crocodile Rocks having some Aboriginal Australian cave paintings, so MegaGlobal shut the whole place down. There was a court case about it but, just before it started, McGarrity found the cave paintings here and it all went quiet about Crocodile Rocks."

Ellie's jaw dropped. "Wow."

"Very," said Denny. "There's more: MegaGlobal Industries does a lot for charity and sponsorship. One of those sponsorships is what brought us all here. They are the money behind the Young Artists Cultural Campout and they own the TV station that broadcasts Brushes McGarrity."

"So McGarrity is in MegaGlobal's pocket," I said, trying to piece it all together in my head.

"Looks like it." Denny flicked a finger, and a map of Australia flashed on-screen. He pointed at an area colored in red. "This is where the crocs are. There's no record of a crocodile of any size getting this far south."

"So that means …?" I tried—and failed—to figure out exactly what Denny *did* mean.

"This croc was brought in," Ellie finished helpfully.

Denny nodded. "Exactamundo."

Another image flashed up, this time showing the logo of a trucking company. "Outback Trucking," Denny said. "Specializes in the transportation of large animals. Crocodiles a speciality. Owned by—"

"Let me guess," Ellie said. "MegaGlobal Industries?"

"Correct." Denny brought up another webpage, which had a picture of a large rectangular cage that looked exactly the size of the box behind McGarrity's trailer. "The ReptoHouse XXL Cage costs eight hundred dollars and one was ordered by a McGarrity, B., of Bigbottom Creek last month. Look familiar? I'm figuring that McGarrity is using the tame croc to keep people's noses out of Crocodile Rocks."

Ellie looked up at us. "Something tells me we might need to go and take a look at the ravine again."

MEAT

ARMED WITH DENNY'S information, which slotted plenty of missing pieces into the jigsaw, the three of us headed out into the desert again.

To be honest, I would have felt a whole bunch better if we really *had* been special-agent types, but, out there in the dark, we were just three arty geeks with some wild ideas, all of which could be wide of the mark by the width of the Pacific Ocean.

Maybe finding out what Brushes McGarrity and MegaGlobal Industries were up to—or if they were up to anything at all—was way out of our reach. Despite all this kind-of-sort-of-possibly being my idea, I now wasn't sure I wanted to get *this* serious about it all.

On the one hand, it did look very much like something was going on out at Crocodile Rocks and that McGarrity was in it up to his bristly red neck. But on the other hand, it really wasn't any of my business.

Denny, though, wasn't about to let things go. Ever since he'd found out that Crocodile Rocks was part of an Aboriginal Australian land rights claim, he'd been pretty determined to dig deeper. He'd discovered that five hundred pounds of meat had been shipped out a few days before the camp started. We figured that this could be for the croc, which meant, in theory, that it shouldn't be that hungry.

In theory.

“There,” Ellie said, once we were close to the ravine. “See the light?”

Denny, who had missed all the “fun” when we were out here last night, took a moment to see what Ellie was pointing out. “Okay, got it,” he said.

We slowly moved forward. I could feel my breath quickening and told myself to relax.

I’d been in these situations before. I was, after all, A Man of Experience.

At the edge of the ravine, we lay down on our bellies and wriggled to the lip of the cliff. Just like last night, Brushes was sitting on a sun lounger, chatting with the men in suits. I swallowed hard as I looked at the empty crocodile cage. Meat or no meat, being out here with a thing like that was no joke.

Ellie nudged my elbow and gestured for us to drop back. With Brushes and The Suits safely tucked up at the ravine, it was time for us to take a closer look at what was going on over at Crocodile Rocks.

ROCK AND ROLL

IT TOOK US about an hour to get to Crocodile Rocks and that hour was right up there with the lousiest ones of my life.

We were on foot and in the dark, and the whole time we were out there, there was the very real possibility of bumping into that croc … or any of the other six trillion toxic animals that live in Australia. So, all things considered, it wasn't exactly a stroll in the park. I'd have been happier dancing into Mrs. Stricker's office wearing a tutu.

Eventually, though, we arrived at a spot where we could see what was going on. We climbed carefully up a rocky slope, toward a ledge which overlooked the crocodile's mouth—the area we'd seen the lights disappear the previous night.

"Whoa," Denny said as we all looked down. "Check it out."

The lights at Crocodile Rocks weren't coming from cars—they were coming from trucks. *Lots* of trucks. Diggers too. In fact, judging by the number of vehicles going in and out, there was a totally serious operation going on down there.

"Looks like MegaGlobal mean business," Ellie said. She lifted her camera to her eye and started filming.

"Seems pretty busy for a place that's supposed to be closed," I agreed.

Denny unpacked his mobile satellite kit. "We have to get this on the internet," he said.

"Wait," a rock next to Denny said. "Not so fast."

We all froze.

Whatthefreakinwhatwhat?

Now, I don't know about you, but when a rock starts talking, it kind of gives you a shock. As far as I was concerned there were only three possibilities:

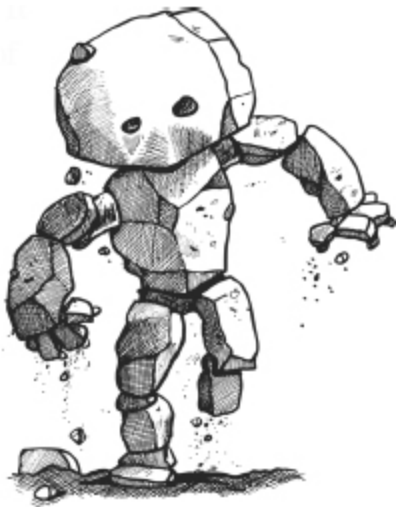
1. This wasn't actually happening. Maybe I was having one of my fantasy moments.

2. We had stumbled into a parallel universe.

3. There really *was* a rock talking to us.

I was kind of edging toward the parallel universe theory when the rock began to move, and I stopped trying to make sense of what was happening. We watched, paralyzed with fear, as the rock got to its feet (yup, the thing had feet) and stood up, silhouetted against the truck lights coming from Crocodile Rocks. Small stones and dust cascaded down from the creature's head and skitter-scattered across the ground. It was something straight out of a horror movie.

"RUN!" Denny yelled.



Ellie and I scrabbled frantically to escape. As I stumbled down the slope, I turned back to see the rock monster's hand coming down on Denny's shoulder. I skidded to a halt. We couldn't just leave him.

"Get out of here!" Denny cried out as he struggled helplessly in the rock monster's granite grip. It was the bravest thing I'd ever seen. Certainly braver than the bravest thing I'd ever done (which, for the record, was the time I'd insulted Miller the Killer right to his face).

"We can't just go!" Ellie said.

"Stop!" the rock monster growled. With Denny firmly in its grip, the creature took a step toward us.

"Aaaargh!" Ellie screamed and ran.

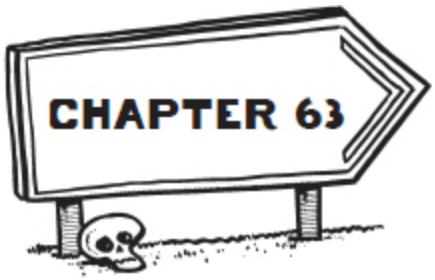
Okay, confession time: it was actually me who screamed and ran, not Ellie. But she wasn't far behind. Being brave was one thing but being caught by a rock monster was another.

I didn't even know what a rock monster would *do* in that situation. Eat me? Crush me? Crush me and then eat me? Turn me into rock? One thing was for sure: I didn't want to hang around to find out. I felt sorry for Denny—like, *really*, *really* sorry—but there was no way Ellie and I could fight a thing like that. *It was made of rock!* Our only chance was to get back to the ravine and raise the alarm. Whatever scheme Brushes and The Suits were up to would have to wait until we'd tried to save Denny.

Denny didn't reply. Instead, I heard a horrible grinding sound that I never, ever wanted to hear again.

I kept running and didn't look back.

We'll be back!



THIS IS BARRY

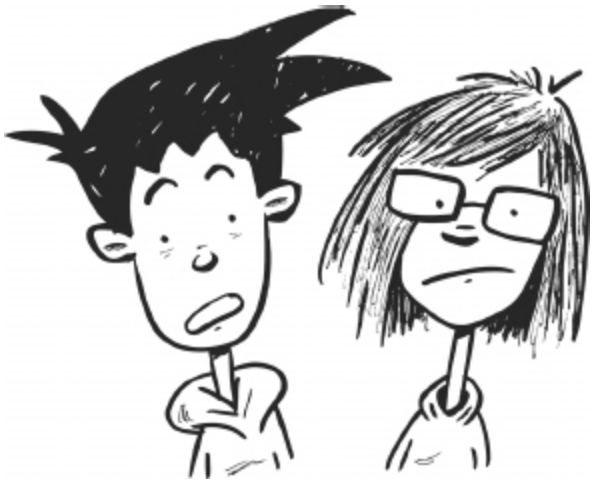
IT’S HARD ENOUGH trying to find your way around a desert at night without having to worry about crocodiles. Add a mutant killer rock monster to the mix and there’s only going to be one result: we got lost. It might have taken us an hour to get to Crocodile Rocks, but it took us *waaaay* longer to find our way back.

The adrenaline had left us both feeling weak as kittens. We were covered in dust and our ankles were bruised and scratched from our panicky getaway. Eventually, though, we saw the lights from the ravine and picked up the pace. We were sure that Denny had been crunched or eaten or turned into rock himself by now but we still had to let some grown-ups know.

About fifty yards from the ravine, Denny stepped out from behind a rock.

“Hi,” he said.

This is how surprised we looked:



I think I would have passed out if I hadn’t been so relieved.

“Denny!” I yelled, grabbing his shoulders to check he was real. “You’re alive!”

Denny put a finger to his lips. “Quiet. And yes, I’m alive.”

“What happened?” Ellie said. “The last we saw that … that *thing* had hold of you!”

“Riiiiight,” Denny said. “It’s probably easier to show you than explain. Just don’t freak out, okay?” He moved back to the rock he’d been hiding behind. “This is Barry.”

“What is Barry?” I asked, thinking Denny’s experience must have scrambled his brain.

“Me,” said the rock, moving forward and putting out a hand. “I’m Barry.”

FREAK-OUT TIME

THE ROCK MONSTER held out his hand.

"Rafe," I replied, shaking it.

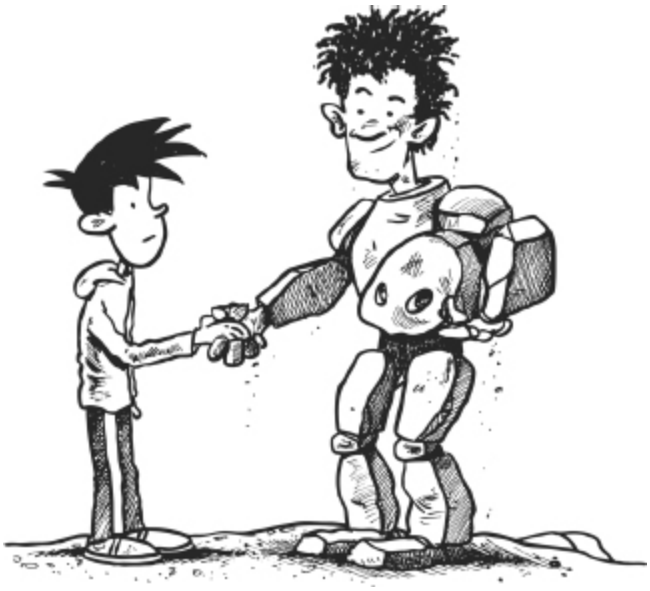
I didn't freak out, but I got real close to it for a couple of seconds.

The rock monster had human hands, and now that I had a chance to look more closely I could see that the rock monster was actually a dude wearing some pretty convincing desert camouflage.

"Barry's been doing the same as us," Denny explained. "He's trying to find out what's happening at Crocodile Rocks. He's a photographer."

Barry held up an expensive-looking camera with a long zoom lens. "I was pretty close tonight," he said. He took off his headgear and I could see Barry was a guy aged about thirty.

Or maybe fifty.



To be honest, I can't really tell how old grown-ups are—especially when they're disguised as a rock.

"Things have been getting busier around here over the past few weeks, so MegaGlobal have been getting sloppy. I think I might have got something on the camera tonight but I'm not sure," Barry said.

Denny tapped his bag of digital goodies. "Only one way to find out."

At a quiet spot, not too far from Kamp Kulture, Denny downloaded Barry's pictures.

Most of them were shots of the inside of the entrance to Crocodile Rocks but they were all either too grainy or too fuzzy or too dark to see much of anything.

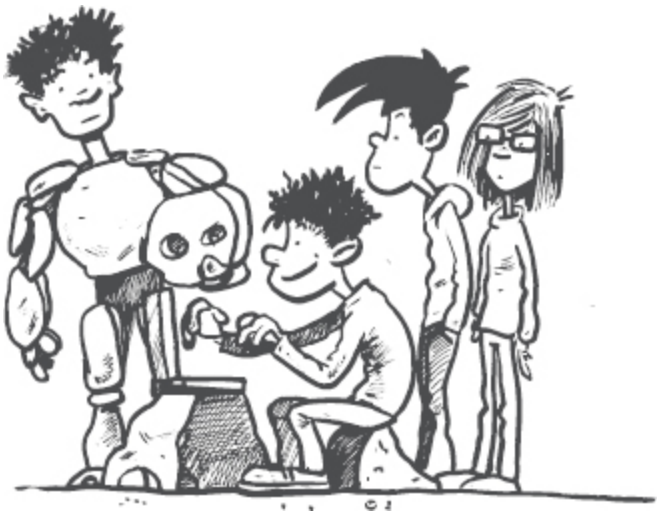
"Useless," Barry said. He kicked a nearby stone, sending it flying across the desert. "I really thought tonight …" He trailed off miserably. He looked about as sad as someone dressed as a rock could look, which, for the record, is pretty sad.

Denny leaned back and flexed his fingers. "Don't panic just yet, mates," he said. "Stand back and watch a master at work."

We watched as his fingers flew over the keyboard, feeding the images through different filters. After a minute or two, he stopped suddenly.

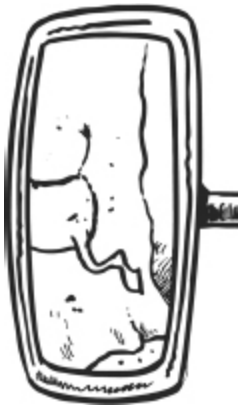
"What is it?" Ellie asked.

On-screen was a close-up of the inside of the cave. Most of the photo showed the back of a workman's head and the wing mirror of a truck heading out of the cave.



“What is it?” I said, and Denny pointed to a squiggle on the wing mirror. He tapped a key three times and the image sharpened. Reflected in the truck’s mirror, plain as a pimple on Miller the Killer’s face, was the cave wall, and on it was an ancient painting …

… of an antelope’s butt.



CHAPTER 65

MOONDANCING MANIACS

WE WERE RIGHT! Brushes McGarrity, Cousin Vern, and The Suits *were* up to something!

We wanted to yell and shout but, because we had to keep everything quiet, we had to dance around silently, grinning like chimpanzees and waving our arms.

We must have looked nuts.

If that croc had wandered past right then, he'd have had second thoughts about attacking such a bunch of fruitloops.

Once we'd calmed down a bit, we put the story together.

"So McGarrity copied the paintings," Barry said, "to deflect attention away from Crocodile Rocks. Once word got out that there were real

Aboriginal cave paintings, MegaGlobal would never have got the license to dig."

"Why would such a big mining company bother with an area like Crocodile Rocks?" Ellie asked. "It's too small to develop as an iron ore mine even if they did find it there."

"They're not looking for iron ore," Barry said. "They're looking for diamonds—one particular diamond."

The LEGEND of the BLUE BUDGIE
Almost fifty years ago there was a diamond robbery in Darwin.
NEE-NAW!
The diamond that was stolen was the "Mighty Azure Eagle Flame of the North."
But it was better known as "The Blue Budgie."
After the diamond was lost, treasure hunters from all over Australia had been searching for it...
Beep!

DOES BARRY THE ROCK MONSTER EXIST?

AFTER A SLEEP so deep you'd have needed a nuclear-powered sub to wake me, I unglued my eyelids and lay back on my swag, looking up at a cloudy sky.

Clouds.

That was good.

I had never properly appreciated clouds until I went to the outback. With clouds around, today might not feel like I was an overdone brownie on the top shelf of the oven at Swifty's, I thought.

My throat felt like a wombat had bedded down in there for the night and, without checking, I just knew this was a bad hair day to end all bad hair days. I had dreamt plenty but none of my dreams was as straight up *batzoid* as what had happened last night.

Or *had* it happened?

Was it possible I'd imagined everything? Did Barry the rock monster exist? Had we really uncovered evidence that Brushes McGarrity and MegaGlobal Industries were involved in some sort of crooked diamond scam? Had I missed breakfast?

It turned out I hadn't, which was good because I was so hungry I could almost have eaten a vegemite sandwich.

Almost.

I staggered across to the food tent and took a seat at the table, trying to figure out last night.

Eric and Monique were just finishing up and they told me that today we'd all be doing our art. There would be no trips and no organized events. Brushes had taken himself off somewhere, which suited me just fine since I wasn't looking forward to keeping my mouth shut all day.

Vern clattered a stack of bacon, eggs, and pancakes the size of Brisbane down in front of me. There was so much food on my plate that if it fell over it could easily injure someone, so I spent a happy forty-two seconds relocating the pancakes to a safer location—my stomach.

I'll say this for Big Vern: he might be a great hulking, dumb henchman but he sure knew how to drive a griddle.

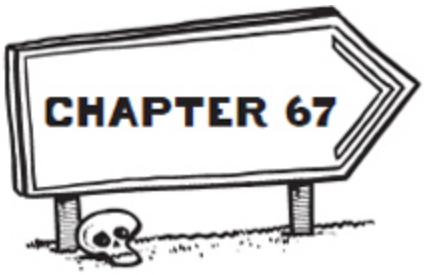
Eric and Monique left, and while I ate I watched Vloot working on the sculpture of Brushes McGarrity. Somewhere from out behind the camp, I

could hear what sounded like two cats fighting in a washing machine. I figured Yrsa was doing some experimenting … or maybe that's just what Icelandic music sounds like. Linda had spread out a sheet of plastic and was grinding rocks into some kind of paint. There was no sign of Thiago and, judging from the snores coming from their swags, Ellie and Denny were still fast asleep.

This was how I'd kind of imagined the camp to be when I'd first got the invitation—everyone doing their arty thing under the big Australian sky.

I decided that, while we were waiting for news from Barry, that's what I'd do too. After all, I wasn't here to do battle with mining companies.

I was an artist.



OUR BRAZILIAN IS MISSING

I FOUND A quiet spot and started working on some paintings and drawings. It was a night scene of Crocodile Rocks. I hadn't done much drawing and painting since I'd arrived, so it felt good to lose myself in it for a while.

From time to time I glanced up and saw Ellie and Denny chatting. After a while I saw them walk over to where Thiago's swag was. Something about the way they were standing made me put down my paintbrush. Denny bent over and looked at the ground. He said something to Ellie.

I walked over to them, a bad feeling growing in the pit of my stomach … right next to that stack of pancakes. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen (or smelled) Thiago since yesterday.

"What is it?" I said when I reached Thiago's swag.

Ellie pointed at the ground. I couldn't see much, just some footprints and marks in the red dirt.

"What?" I said.

Denny pulled me over to a couple of tracks about a shoulder-width apart. He squatted down and pointed at the dirt. "Looks to me like someone's dragged Thiago out of his swag," he said. "Look, here are some finger marks—that'd be Thiago. Large feet here and here, and two drag tracks going up and over there."

"How did you work that out?" I said, impressed. "Is that some kind of ancient tracker knowledge thing?"

"*Crooked Case Histories*," Denny replied.

“I love that show. They had one on a beach where a bloke had been dragged off his sun lounger.”

“Never mind *how* he knows,” Ellie said. “The big question is, what’s happened to Thiago?”

We followed the trail out of Kamp Kulture and toward the creek.

“I don’t like this one little bit,” Ellie said. She was filming the tracks and I had a quick flash forward—*frrrrp!*—to a courtroom with Ellie’s footage being shown as evidence.

Denny, who was a little in front of us, suddenly stopped. He bent down and came back up with a ripped piece of cloth.

“What’s that?” Ellie asked.

The tattered yellow-and-green cloth hung from Denny’s fingers and turned in the breeze to reveal a blue badge with a white logo. It was from a Brazilian soccer shirt—last seen on Thiago DaSilva.

Forget *Crooked Case Histories*, this looked like it could be *Crocs Case Histories*.

"LET'S SPLIT UP" AND OTHER DUMB IDEAS

WE DID EXACTLY what we shouldn't have done: we split up to search for Thiago.

I even heard myself saying "good idea, that way we can cover more ground". Hadn't I learned *anything* from watching scary movies?

We agreed to meet back at camp in an hour, hopefully with Thiago in tow. If we hadn't found him by then, the plan was to get everyone else involved. If that failed, we'd have to talk to Brushes. There was no other option.

The area I was searching took me in the direction of the secret ravine. As I got closer I heard something that sounded a lot like one of Thiago's *parps*. I kept my head down and crawled to the edge of the rise and peered at the ravine below.

I risked a peek. The sound I'd heard wasn't Thiago farting. It was a truck horn.

The place seemed full of them. There were six MegaGlobal trucks along with a whole bunch more of men wearing suits. Brushes McGarrity was in the middle of a group of people studying a map spread out across the hood of one of the trucks.

I wished I had a pair of binoculars to get a closer look at that map.

I inched forward. As I did, a large stone came loose and bounced slowly down the hill, getting faster and faster as it neared the trucks.

The stone bounced hard on the flat part of the ravine, took a wicked swerve left, and clanged loudly against the fender of a truck. Everyone in the ravine stopped talking. Then they all looked at the truck and then back up the rise at me.

I ducked and rolled backwards down the hill, my feet scrabbling for balance. I didn't *think* they'd seen me. Without looking back, I raced to Kamp Kulture. Behind me, I heard a truck engine start.

They were after me.

As I ran, I thought about Thiago's shredded soccer jersey, about the croc Brushes McGarrity kept in a cage behind the trailer, about the astonishing amount of money The Blue Budgie might be worth, and about what bad people like MegaGlobal would do to nosy kids who poked around in things that were none of their business.

CHAPTER 69

URGENT BUM ISSUE

IF YOU'VE EVER wondered what it would be like to be able to run faster than an Olympic gold medalist, I can totally recommend being chased by a giant crocodile and a pack of MegaGlobal henchmen as a surefire way to find out.

Traveling at roughly the speed of light, I covered the distance from the ravine back to Kamp Kulture in about six seconds flat. With a last glance over my shoulder to check that I'd given them the slip—and unless they'd been strapped to the back of a heat-seeking missile, I was pretty sure I *had*—I hurtled into camp so fast that when I put on the brakes I dug a trench nine feet long.

Okay, maybe I’m exaggerating a little … but I *was* moving pretty fast. I waited a few seconds for my lungs to stop burning and then casually walked into camp.

Barry the rock monster was there along with two tough-looking police officers and a couple of regular guys talking to Vern. Yrsa was back from torturing her violin, Vloot was working on his sculpture, and Monique was still quietly folding paper.

And there, sitting to one side of this group at the table and wolfing down a plate of eggs, was Thiago.

I blinked.

Don’t get me wrong—I was real glad to see Thiago … I just hadn’t expected to *ever* see him again. I caught Ellie’s eye and she shrugged.

“What happened?” I asked when I was close enough.

“He got lost,” Denny said. “Had a UBI.”

“A UBI?”

“Urgent Bum Issue.” Denny pointed at the desert. “When you gotta go, you gotta go. Y’know?”

“Oh,” I said. “Uh, yeah.”

“Never mind all *that*,” Ellie said. “The big news is, the police are going to go out to Crocodile Rocks!”

Denny nodded and smiled. “Barry’s mate on the council pulled a few strings. The MegaGlobal people aren’t happy but they’re going anyway.”

“This will be epic,” Ellie said. She held up her camera. “I’m going to film the whole thing.”

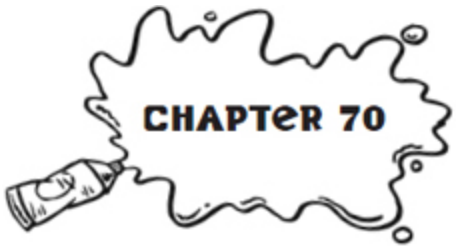
“Looks like you’ve done it,” Leo said.

“Where have *you* been?” I asked. Until Leo appeared, I hadn’t really noticed I hadn’t seen much of him lately.

Leo shrugged. “You’ve been busy running all over the desert, fighting crocs, discovering crooks—exciting stuff.”

I nodded. Leo was right. I *had* been busy and it did look like we’d got a real result. It *was* exciting.

So why did I feel like I had an Urgent Bum Issue of my own?



I'M GETTING A WEIRD FEELING ABOUT THIS

WHEN WE REACHED the entrance of Crocodile Rocks, the place was deserted. No trucks. No suits. No henchmen. Nothing.

"I'm getting a weird feeling about this," I said to Ellie, but she wasn't listening. She had her camera out and was circling the scene, trying to get a good angle. If we *were* right about Crocodile Rocks, this story was going to be HUGE.

Barry, the councilors, and the police walked over to the cave entrance. All the Kamp Kulture kids gathered around. For most of them, it was their first sight of Crocodile Rocks. I noticed Thiago hanging back. I didn't blame him. It was fine by me if I never set foot inside a cave again.

"No sign of activity," one of the cops said, looking at the red dirt. He glanced at Barry. "You say you saw trucks here?"

Barry nodded. "Plenty."

"Let's get on with it, Baz," said one of the councilors. "It's a long way back tonight."

"The paintings are about fifty yards in," Barry said, "as far as I can tell from the photos. They can't be too far back."

"Get the big torch out of the truck, Rollo," one of the cops called. "It's black as coal in here."

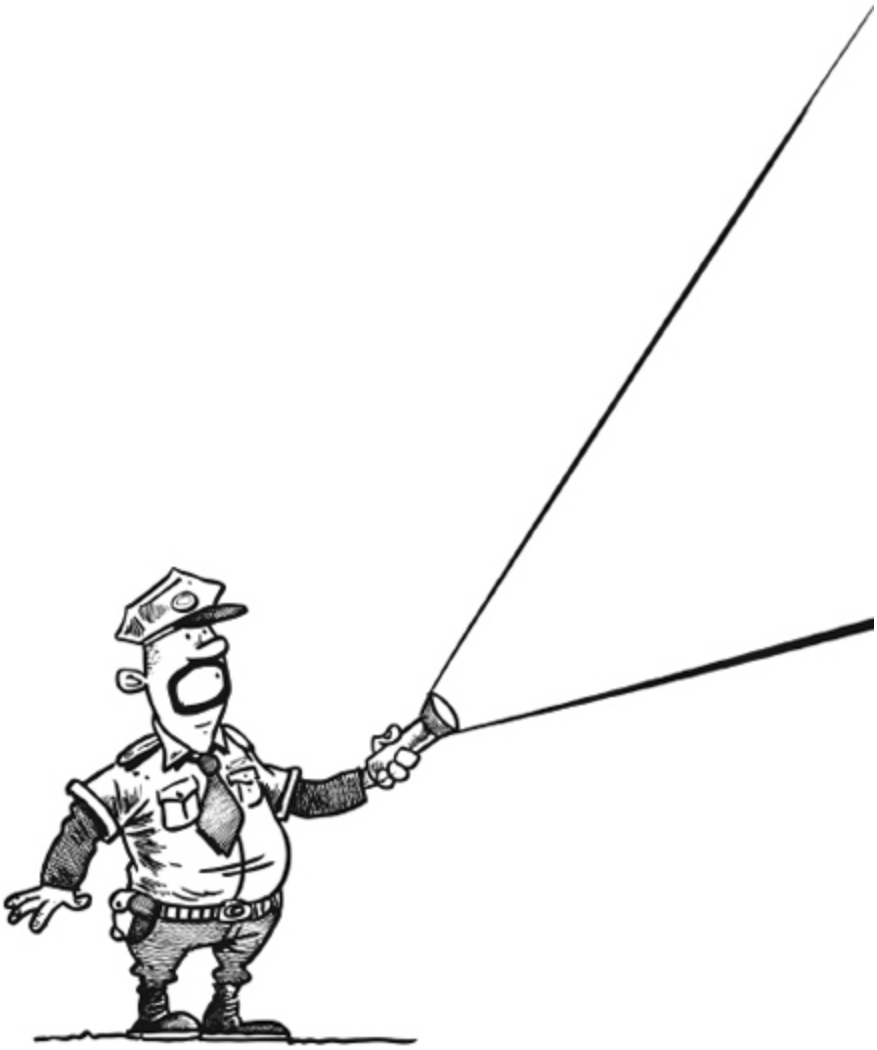
As Rollo headed to the truck, everyone else entered the cave. I touched the lucky pebble in my pocket, took a deep breath, and followed them inside.

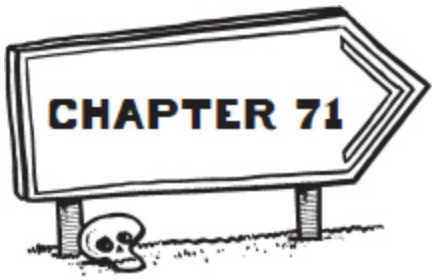
By the time Rollo got back, we'd all wandered about ten paces inside the cave entrance. Although you couldn't see far, I got the sense that this

cave was much, much bigger than the one nearer to our camp. A truck would have no problem getting inside.

"C'mon," Barry said. "Let's get some light."

Rollo switched on the torch and pointed the beam up at the cave walls.





THAT'S IT?

THIS WAS WHAT was on the walls:

A big, fat nothing. *Zilch*, *nada*, *rien.*

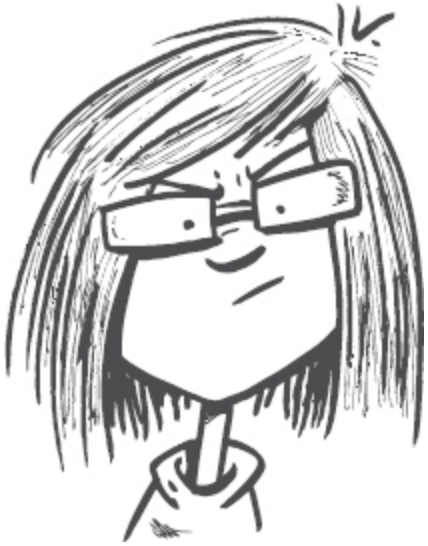
No antelope, no hunters, no crocodiles. Just a sheer wall of smooth, curved sandstone disappearing into deep shadow near the cave roof.

"They must be further back." Barry picked up the torch and ran down the tunnel, the light dancing as he moved to show more and more blank rock. "They've got to be here!" Barry's voice got more and more puzzled the further inside the cave he went. He said some words I can't repeat here.

We followed him another eighty paces or so down the tunnel until it was obvious that the whole place was completely, absolutely, 100 percent empty of anything resembling an ancient Aboriginal Australian cave painting.

"I don't get it," Denny whispered.

Ellie looked like someone had handed her a really difficult math problem.



I saw the two cops exchange glances. The councilors did the same. Linda tapped me on the shoulder and raised her eyebrows questioningly. It must have been really confusing for her and for all the campers who couldn't speak much English. I tried to explain what had happened but gave up. And before you start thinking I should have stuck at it, you try explaining something like that using only your hands and eyebrows—and in the *dark*.

Barry came back into view, his expression grim. "They've cleaned it all!" he said. He kicked a nearby stone and said more of those words I can't repeat.

"Overnight?" Rollo said doubtfully.

"This is a big company we're talking about!" Barry retorted. "They could get something like that done easy! MegaGlobal are—"

"We need to be careful, Baz," one of the councilors said. "MegaGlobal are real powerful. You can't just go flinging stories around without proof, mate."

Barry's head exploded.

Okay, it didn't, but it was a close-run thing there for a second or two.

Barry handed the torch back to Rollo.

"That's it?" Denny said. "Just like that?"

"That's it," Barry replied, and headed toward the light.

I'd like to be able to tell you that we discovered some other clue out there at Crocodile Rocks and that the police dug a little deeper and found

out that everything we'd told them was true and they threw us a big party with fireworks and the King of Australia gave us all medals.

But, hey! Guess what? That didn't happen.

Vern took us back to the camp, his face as blank as the walls of Crocodile Rocks.

Barry got back into a car with the councilors and headed back to Bigbottom Creek. Denny stalked off toward the campfire and lay down in his swag. From the look on his face, I knew he didn't want company.

"What now?" Ellie said.

I shook my head. "I guess we do what we came here to do."

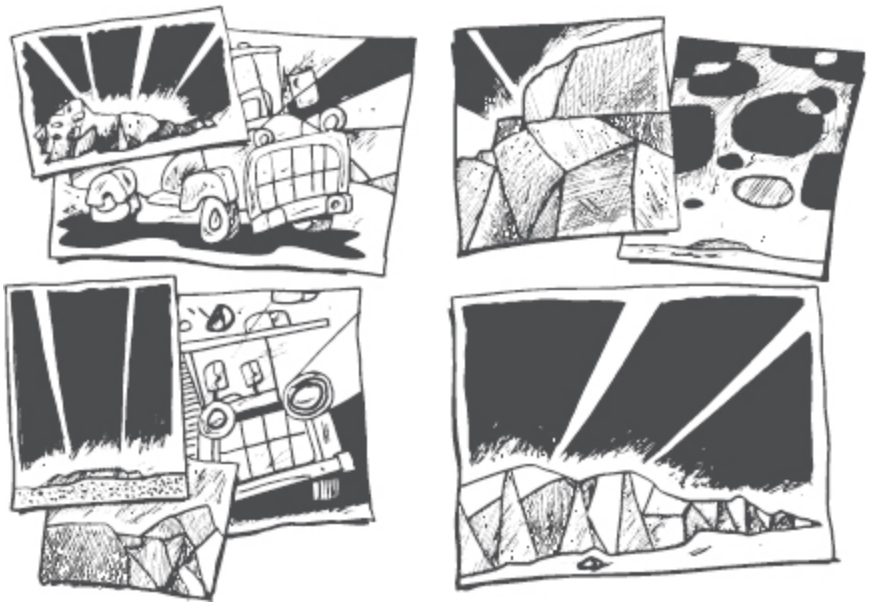
FUN. REMEMBER FUN?

CHIAROSCURO.

That's what I was painting and drawing.

It means working with a lot of very dark areas on the canvas or page. I was mostly creating night scenes of Crocodile Rocks silhouetted by the crisscrossing headlights from the (nonexistent) trucks.

Since it looked like all our amateur detective work was leading nowhere, I figured I might as well get something down on paper. Experience, see? I was pretty excited by them too. They made me feel as though I was getting somewhere, but I didn't know that what I was doing even *had* a name until Denny told me.



He had stayed quiet the day we'd been out to Crocodile Rocks but by the following morning he was back doing his thing, making a digital video mash-up about the camp from Ellie's footage and Yrsa's music. Denny got Ellie to film me painting and then put graphics over parts of the project, which was when I learned I was making *chiaroscuro* art.

It looked amazing.

All the Kamp Kulture kids did their own way cool stuff that week, getting ready for the touring exhibition (starting in Australia, then heading to Vietnam, Iceland, Scotland, Latvia, and ending up in Holland). Some of them, like Ellie and Denny, worked in teams. Others, like me, Eric, and Monique, did our own thing. Vloot kept working on his sculpture of Brushes.

We got to know each other better too.

I learned that *fimmtudagur* is the Icelandic word for Thursday, found out that Skonto F.C. was Linda the Latvian's favorite soccer team and that she was a pretty good player, tasted a ball of traditional Ghanaian *Jollof* rice made by Eric, and was taught some rude Dutch words by Vloot.

After three days, Glen came back from Bigbottom Creek and showed that he was possibly the world's only Scottish rapper. We couldn't understand a word but it sounded great.

We were having fun and, slowly, as the days passed, the whole thing about being chased by crocodiles and suspecting that Brushes had invented the paintings in the McGarrity Caves and the diamonds and MegaGlobal and Barry the rock monster seemed to fade until there were times I wasn't sure *any* of it had happened.

I mean, I knew the croc was real but I had no actual proof that Brushes had anything to do with that. There was the cage and the stuff Denny had found online, but it all looked a bit thin in the hot light of day.

Those trucks could possibly, maybe have had something to do with kangaroos. The cave paintings Barry the rock monster had photographed in the wing mirror might have been a trick of the light. We didn't know for sure that Brushes *had* painted the "fake" McGarrity cave paintings.

We knew none of those things. We just thought we did, and I was learning that there's a big difference between the two. That's how things work out sometimes.

Don't blame me.

A FACE LIKE A SLAPPED TROUT

AFTER TEN DAYS in the outback, the Bigbottom Creek Hotel looked like the Monte Carlo Ritz.

We had running water! Cold drinks! Showers!

We had beds! BEDS!

We didn't have to poop out in the desert!

"So much happiness exploding my artery pump!" Linda squeaked, looking around excitedly. Like always, her English wasn't great but I knew exactly what she meant. My artery pump was also exploding with happiness.

This place was complete, yes indeedy, uh-huh-oh-yeah-that's-what-I'm-talking-about, total six-star *luxury* compared to Kamp Kulture. In the first few hours after we got back, I had three showers, six naps, and almost overdosed on ice-cold cans of soda.

We were all due to fly out the next day but before then there was a celebration at the McGarrity Ranch. Brushes came around in the afternoon and gave us all presents to remember Kamp Kulture by, which made me feel bad about spying on him. My present was a pot of paint made from the red outback sand. It was a nice idea but I had already mixed up a few pots of my own, so I swapped the paint for Vloot's present—a little piece of desert rock mounted on a wooden plinth. It looked exactly like my lucky pebble, only shinier.

"Nice rock," Ellie said. She'd been given a little framed drawing Brushes had done of an odd-looking rock formation. It was pretty good.

I nodded but didn’t say much.

The fact was, Ellie and I were in a weird mood. Since we’d gotten back to the hotel, it seemed like everything she said annoyed me and she made it clear that she felt exactly the same way about me. I don’t know why but that’s what it was like.

You ever get that? Just sort of digging at someone when you don’t really want to? Like there’s something making you be nasty? Maybe because we were all going our separate ways. Or maybe it was those hormones again. Whatever it was, we arrived at Brushes McGarrity’s place for the farewell party that night hardly speaking.

Brushes’ place was *huge*. It was a bit rundown here and there maybe but BIG. Running along the back of the main house was his gallery. In the middle, all the stuff we’d done out at Kamp Kulture was arranged on the walls and on plinths along with a whole bunch of stuff by Brushes (which, I have to admit, wasn’t bad).

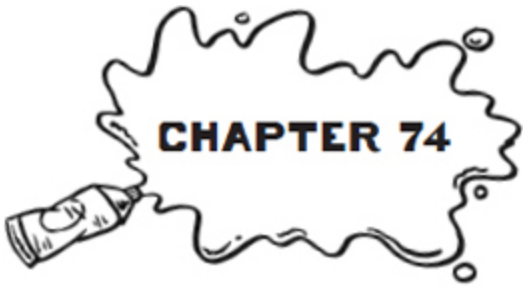
Ellie and Denny’s movie was being projected onto a wall in one corner. Yrsa’s soundtrack played over the speakers. It still sounded like two cats fighting in a washing machine but somehow it was exactly right for the movie. Pretty much everyone who lived in Bigbottom Creek was there, including Barbara, the crying lady from the plane (looking much calmer than the last time I’d seen her), the two cops who’d been out to the caves, Barry the rock monster, the entire Bigbottom Creek Council (both of them), The Suits, and Brushes. The only face I couldn’t see was Vern’s.

I watched Ellie talking and laughing with people who weren’t me and felt a hot flush of anger. That was the only downside to doing interesting stuff—when it comes to an end, it can feel twice as crummy. Ellie glanced over in my direction. What I *should* have done was walk over and join in the conversation, make up with Ellie, and enjoy my last evening in Australia.

What I *did* was turn right around and go out the back door, slamming it behind me as hard as I could.

Hormones. Don’t you hate them?

HeLLo!
A hormone



THE DOG THAT WASN'T A DOG

HEY, GUYS, HERE'S a solid bit of Rafe Khatchadorian advice: when making a dramatic exit, there's one Very Important Point to remember—you have to have somewhere to stomp off dramatically *to*.

I had forgotten this Very Important Point, so once I'd left the house I found myself standing in Brushes' backyard in the dark alone and with exactly zero idea about where I was going to go or what I was going to do when I got there.

Arguing *sucked* and arguing with Ellie on my last night in Australia double-sucked.

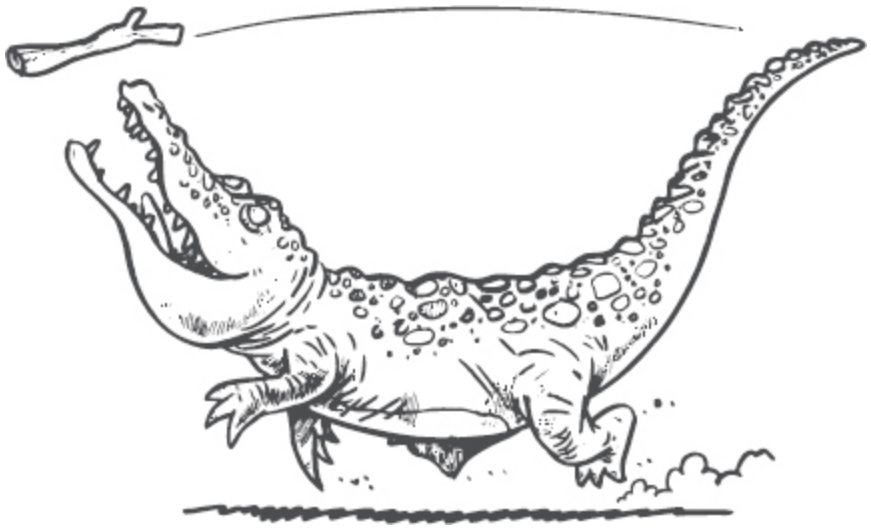
As I stood there wondering what to do, I heard a whistle followed by a series of muffled *thuds*.

There was something off about those thuds. I'd heard them before but I couldn't remember exactly where. The sounds were coming from a big tin shed about two hundred yards from the main house. Curious, I moved closer. Vern was standing outside it, holding a stick. As I watched, he threw the stick and the dog bounced out of the tin shed, its tail wagging in excitement.

I stopped dead. I'd found out what was making those weirdly familiar thudding noises.

The dog was no dog.

It was a croc. The same croc I'd stood on out in the desert.



A lot of things went through my mind at the same time. Here they are in no particular order:

1. We'd been right about Brushes all along! He's in this—whatever "this" is—up to his bristly neck.

2. That croc is *way* bigger than I remember.

3. Crocs like playing fetch—who knew?

4. Brushes has been using the pet croc to put off people snooping at Crocodile Rocks. McGarrity wouldn't have risked using "wild" crocs so close to Kamp Kulture.

5. If McGarrity is crooked, why had he encouraged a bunch of art kids to come here?

The answer to the last one of those questions came to me first. Brushes got us here as camouflage. He *needed* us. The question was, why?

I tried to concentrate. If …

"Uh, Rafe?" Leo said.

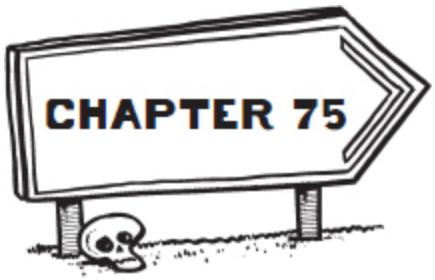
"Not now, Leo." Couldn't he see I was thinking? When I'm thinking, the last thing I need is interruptions.

"I think you need to listen to this interruption," Leo said. "I'm not kidding."

I glared at him. "What?"

He jerked a thumb at the tin shed. The croc had stopped playing with Vern and now both of them were looking right at me.

It was a bad moment.



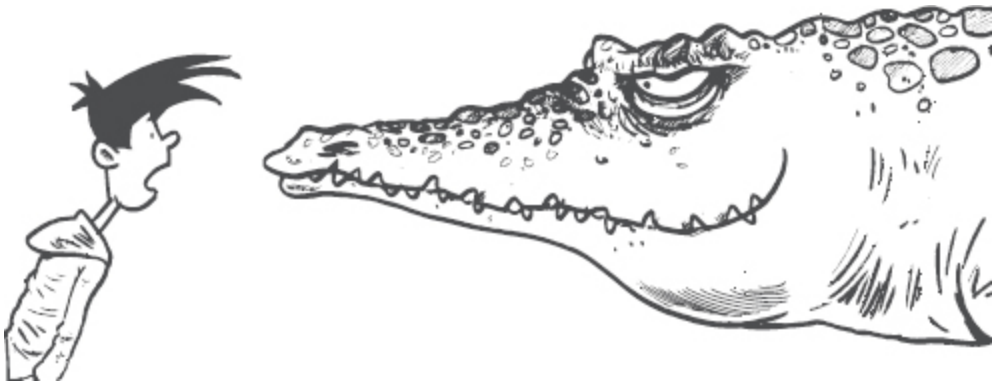
FETCH

MY EYES MET the eyes of the croc. Time stood still.

For a long moment we just looked at each other. I didn't have the slightest doubt that the croc recognized me as the kid who'd peed on his back.

Then I heard Vern say something. It was the first complete word I'd ever heard him say and it gave me an electric jolt that started in my brain and shot down the length of my body. It was the scariest word I had ever heard.

Fetch.



Being a play toy for a monster crocodile was not something I wanted to try. But I did have three things on my side:

(A) a twenty-yard head start;

(B) my lucky pebble in my pocket; and

(C) I'd been in this situation before (*you too can become A Man of Experience!*).

Spinning on my toes, I sprinted across the yard and headed straight for the house. If you've ever been in some sort of accident, you'll know that being in great danger does something different to time. Everything gets real *slooooow*. Every detail becomes ultra-HD-TV sharp. And your brain starts doing strange things.

Example: Instead of thinking *only* about escaping from a monster crocodile, my brain was also finding time to figure out the last few details of Brushes' plan.

The reason Brushes took the risk of having a bunch of teenagers out at the caves was because he needed us to help smuggle The Blue Budgie diamond out of Australia. A company like MegaGlobal Industries couldn't risk being caught with something like The Blue Budgie.

They couldn't afford to be caught smuggling it, either. They had too much to lose. McGarrity probably only needed MegaGlobal for their digging expertise. He must have come up with some sort of deal, but with border security being kind of fussy about sneaking huge diamonds out of Australia, Brushes needed a way of getting The Blue Budgie somewhere it could be sold. It just so happened that the Kamp Kulture exhibition was going to tour all the countries the Young Artists came from—including Holland, *the diamond capital of the world*.

I thought of Vloot's sculpture of McGarrity.

It had always seemed majorly strange that Brushes wanted a sculpture of himself. But what better way to smuggle The Blue Budgie out of the country than by stuffing it inside some kid's sculpture? What border security guard would risk breaking something like that? It might cause an international incident if the IAWCAAW bods heard about it. It was genius.

I figured all that out in the time it took me to get halfway to the house.

Glancing back, I saw that the croc was gaining. I put on an extra spurt and reached the door. Grabbing the handle, I heard that familiar *Boofboom! Boofboom!* getting closer and closer.

Ten yards to go. *Boofboom!*

Five. *Boofboom!*

Two. *Boofboom!*

I yanked open the door.

A KHATCHADORIAN'S GOTTA DO WHAT A KHATCHADORIAN'S GOTTA DO

"CROC!" I YELLED as I skidded into the gallery. "CROC! CROC! CROC! CROC! *CRRRRRROOOOOOOCC!*"

It was safe to say that I had everyone's undivided attention.

I didn't care. All I cared about was getting as far away as possible from the croc. I'd seen the look in that thing's eyes. It wasn't going to let me get away twice.

I hurdled the first display table and zigzagged through the crowd. It was only when I was on my second lap of the gallery that I figured something out.

The croc wasn't there.

I jogged to a halt, scanning the gallery in case it was hiding behind a painting.

"Are you okay, Rafe?" Ellie said, putting a hand on my arm. Of everyone in here, she was the only one not laughing.

Everyone's got a boiling point and mine had just been reached. Sometimes a Khatchadorian's gotta do what a Khatchadorian's gotta do. I took a few paces toward the plinth holding the sculpture of Brushes McGarrity.

"Sorry, Vloot," I said, looking at the Dutch kid.

"What for?" Vloot asked.

"For this," I said, and knocked his sculpture of Brushes to the floor, where it smashed into a thousand pieces.

A gigantic blue diamond skidded across the floor of the gallery and came to rest at the feet of the astonished Bigbottom Creek Police Chief.

Everyone froze and looked at Brushes McGarrity.

"You darn kids," he snarled. "If you hadn't interfered with our crafty scheme to smuggle The Blue Budgie to Amsterdam, I'd have gotten clean away!"

He was right.

This wasn't the movies and McGarrity didn't say anything, mainly because when Vloot's sculpture hit the deck, no hidden diamond came out.

I'd been wrong.

Oops.

CHAPTER 77

MY PANTS ARE FULL OF WASPS

EVERYONE LOOKED AT ME. I wanted to come out with some kind of wisecrack but I couldn't think of anything that sounded right.

So I did what anyone would do—I ran.

I had no idea what I was going to do once I got outside, but even facing the croc was better than staying in the gallery with everyone laughing at me. I hit the gas and took off like a rocket.

Unfortunately, I'd forgotten that the floor was covered in thousands of bits of Vloot's broken sculpture. My right foot landed on Brushes McGarrity's clay nose and I skidded across the shiny polished concrete floor like a first-time ice-skater whose pants were full of wasps.

“Neeeeeyarrrrrrrr!!” I yelled, and slammed headfirst into Eric’s artwork, which was a big kind of net woven from bits of wool that was hanging from the ceiling. I bounced back and crashed awkwardly to the floor.

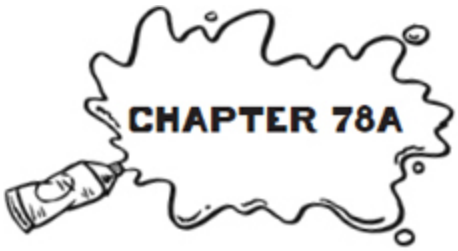
I got up and then fell down.

Then I did it again.

Ellie screamed and I looked down to see my foot pointing the wrong way.

I blinked. I was used to both my feet pointing the same way—forwards.

And then two things hit me at the same time. First, that I had just broken my leg. And second, a tidal wave of pain. I opened my mouth to scream and then everything went black.



BROKEN LEGS HURT ... AND OTHER REALLY OBVIOUS BITS OF INFORMATION

I LOOKED OUT of the hospital window and watched the plane carrying Ellie disappear into the blue sky. Another layer of experience settled on me like dust. I was building up a pretty thick crust now and it was *painful*.

That's the thing about getting experience—you have to have a wound before it becomes scar tissue. Experience isn't always fun. Experience can hurt. Endings hurt. Being humiliated at the gallery hurt. Saying goodbye to Ellie *hurt.* And my broken leg *really* hurt.

Not like when it happened—that had been *waaaaay* beyond painful—but now it had settled into a kind of dull ache. And the thing itched like

crazy.

“Look on the bright side,” Leo said. “There’s only another six weeks before the plaster comes off. Now, can we finish this story and get out of here? I’m bored.”

“We’re going soon,” I said. “Real soon. Cabin crew prepare doors and cross-check for take-off.”

“What?” Leo said.

I leapt onto the back of Lorek Bearsson, my flying warrior polar bear, and hoisted Leo up behind me.

“Ah, the flying polar bear ending! Excellent!” Leo grabbed a double-necked red electric guitar and took up position.

“Hit it!” I said. Leo crashed out a mighty power chord as Lorek Bearsson threw back his head and let out a roar that shook the ground. Flames shot from the neck of Leo’s guitar and we zoomed through the hospital window and up into the powder-blue sky.

“To Hills Village!” I shouted.

We zoomed into the outback, found Bigbottom Creek, and swooped Brushes McGarrity, sending him diving into a handily placed pile of horse manure. Lorek Bearsson turned on the afterburners and soared vertically into the stratosphere, leaving behind a sonic boom that rippled out across the desert and sent kangaroos leaping for cover.

“Now THAT’S what I call an ending!” I yelled.

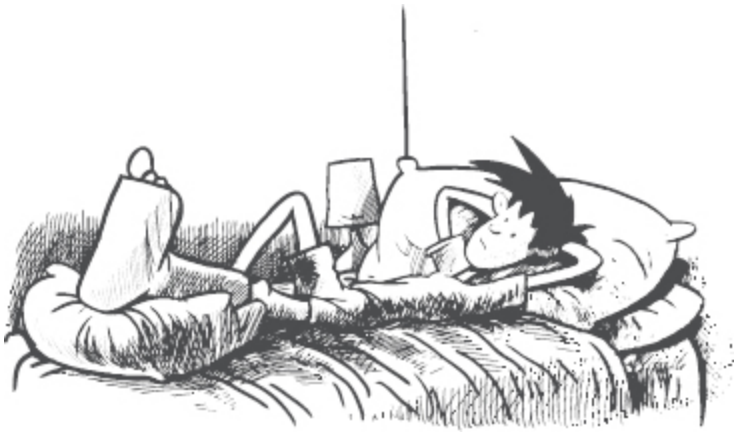
THE HEAVY CHAPTER

WHAT ARE YOU—NUTS?

That flying polar bear ending isn't the ending! You should know me better than that by now.

Things didn't get tied up neatly, though. That bit I *was* right about, which doesn't mean nothing else happened …

A week after I got back home, I was lying on my bed in the middle of the night, looking at the moonlit ceiling, chewing gum, and trying not to think about the itch on my leg that was keeping me awake.



The ceiling seemed smooth at first, but then I started seeing all the little flaws in the paint: a crack here, a scrap of a spider's web there. The longer I looked, the more cracks I saw until it seemed that pretty much most of the bedroom ceiling was about to fall in. But it wasn't—it was still the same old ceiling, just with a bit more wear and tear.

Like me.

I was a different Rafe Khatchadorian from the one who'd left Hills Village four weeks ago. Bigbottom Creek had left its marks.

Some of them—like the broken leg, and the scrapes on my elbows I'd gotten from squeezing into the caves at Crocodile Rocks—were easy to see. The rest weren't visible, but they were still there. Take running into Brushes McGarrity's gallery, yelling "CROC!" at the top of my voice, for example—that was right at the top of my list of embarrassing moments and had left a little scar.

Some of the other marks you can't see were to do with Ellie, and some of them were because another Khatchadorian adventure had come to an end.

And one of them was because I was back home.

That felt *wrong*. Me feeling bad about being home, I mean. I felt guilty I wasn't more excited about seeing Mom and Georgia and Grandma Dotty and Junior. Don't get me wrong—it was great seeing them again (especially Junior) and they were making a big fuss about my leg and all … It just didn't match up to the things I'd been doing in Australia.

I shrugged. Shrugging is difficult when you're lying down, but since Leo only existed in my head it didn't matter.

I was going to say something when I heard a noise at my bedroom window. It was a tiny noise—the kind of noise a branch of a tree might make when it brushed the windowsill.

Except we didn't have any trees next to the house.

SQUEAKY BUM TIME

I HOPPED ACROSS to the window as best I could, keeping my head down. The noise I'd heard was a ladder being put in place very quietly and very carefully. Through the open window I could hear someone beginning to climb the ladder. Whoever it was was moving real slow and quiet.

Burglars!

I was just about to start yelling when I saw something move out by the edge of our yard. It was a figure dressed all in black, standing in the shadows of the house next door. I couldn't see much but right then the guy turned and caught a patch of light. That was when I saw it—poking out from under the brim of his cap was a bushy beard that, even from this distance, could only belong to one guy: Brushes McGarrity.

I glanced across to the piece of cave rock I'd swapped with Vloot and everything fell into place—all of it, all at once, every last detail.

The Blue Budgie was sitting right there on my bedside table...
And Brushes McGarrity was here to get it.
The diamond had never been in Vloot's sculpture.
Smuggling it out to Amsterdam had been the plan...
until I'd messed things up by swapping my pot of paint for Vloot's cave rock.

Time stopped.

I had seconds to decide what to do before Vern—who else could it be on the ladder?—reached my room. I thought about Mom and Georgia and Grandma Dotty and how desperate and dangerous McGarrity had to be to come all this way and break into our house. So instead of yelling out or calling the cops, I did something else before hopping back to bed and closing my eyes.

If I'd got this wrong I was dead meat.

CHAPTER 78D

HOW TO BREATHE

YOU NEVER REALLY notice how weird your breathing is until a giant smuggler breaks into your room in the dead of night. I was trying so hard to convince Vern I was fast asleep I started snoring like my life depended on it—which it probably did. I sounded like a dying rhino with asthma and I was afraid I'd wake up Junior (btw, what a lousy guard dog), so I toned it way down until I only sounded like a rhino who'd been out jogging. It seemed to do the trick.

I have to admit Vern made a pretty good burglar.

I mean, I don't have that much—or *any*—experience with burglars, but for such a massive guy, he hardly made a sound. Even so, I still knew *exactly* where he was.

One time I was at my desk in school drawing a picture of Mrs. Stricker when, somehow, I knew she'd materialized behind me and I turned the page

just before she could see. A few seconds later and she'd have bitten my head clean off.

That was what it was like now. The exact same super-spidey safety sense took over and I could *feel* Vern moving around my room like a great big Australian burglar gorilla.

Right then it felt like I'd made a major Khatchadorian boo-boo by not calling the cops. Maybe I'd tried to be too clever. What did I think I was—some kind of mastermind? *Vern could finish me off at any moment.*

I risked a peek and, through my one half-open eye, watched Vern find The Blue Budgie and slip it in his pocket. As he turned to look at me, my eyelid slammed shut with a loud *CLANG!* Okay, it didn't, but it sure *felt* like that.

For a long—like, *really* long—moment, there was total silence, which made me imagine all kinds of horrible stuff. Then I heard the best sound I've ever heard: the sound of Vern grunting as he heaved himself out of the window and down the ladder.

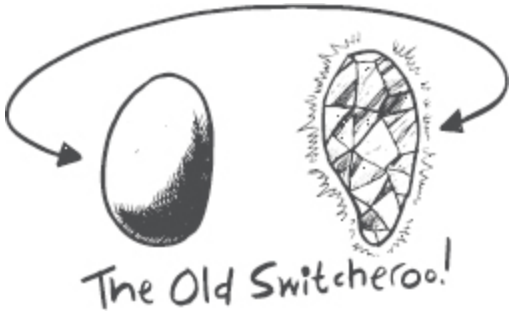
It was over.

COOL BEANS

I WAITED UNTIL the morning before I said anything so that Brushes and Vern could get as far away as possible from Hills Village. The last thing I wanted was those two coming back any time soon. At seven o'clock I pulled The Blue Budgie out from the top of my leg cast and …

I know what you're thinking: *The Blue Budgie? Didn't you just tell us you saw Vern take that from your bedroom?*

Well, yes. Okay, I *did* say that. What I totally forgot to mention was that, in the time it took for me to get from the window back into bed, I had substituted my lucky pebble for The Blue Budgie, fixing it in place with my chewing gum. I figured that in the dark, one rock was going to feel exactly like any other rock to Vern, and that Brushes would be too keen on making a getaway to check too closely.



Neat, huh?

Of course, I had to tell Mom all about it and get the police involved and that would mean about a year of explaining and blah-blah-blah, so instead

I'll just fast forward—*FRRRRRPP!*—right past all that and flat-out *tell* you what happened.

The cops caught up with Brushes and Vern at Atlanta Airport, where they were changing planes for—you guessed it—Amsterdam.

The fake Blue Budgie (aka my lucky pebble) was hidden in their luggage. I heard later that they didn't know there'd even been a switch until the cops told them. I'd like to have seen that. I still hadn't forgiven Brushes for setting his pet croc on me.

I emailed Denny about everything and he told Barry the rock monster. Barry and some of his activist buddies got a freeze on any more digging activity out at Crocodile Rocks, and the McGarrity Caves are probably going to be renamed real soon.

Because of all the publicity about The Blue Budgie, the art show by all of us became kind of a smash hit. We got famous for a while.

This is the best one: I got invited back to Australia once my leg's all fixed. They want to give me an award or something. I'm not kidding. I think they want to make me Lord High Chief Khatchadorian or Governor Khatchadorian or King of Tasmania or something super-cool like that. It'd be great. Australia's starting to feel like a second home … and I'd get to see more of Ellie. (We made up.)

All I have to do now is convince Mom …

Wish me luck.

James Patterson is the internationally bestselling author of the highly praised Middle School books, *Homeroom Diaries*, *House of Robots*, *Kenny Wright: Superhero* and the I Funny, Treasure Hunters, Confessions, Maximum Ride, Witch & Wizard and Daniel X series. James Patterson has been the most borrowed author in UK libraries for the past eight years in a row and his books have sold more than 300 million copies worldwide, making him one of the biggest-selling authors of all time. He lives in Florida.

Martin Chatterton was born in Liverpool, England and has been successfully writing and illustrating books for almost thirty years. He has written dozens of children's books and illustrated many more for other writers, including several British Children's Laureates. His work has been published in fourteen languages and has won and been shortlisted in numerous awards in the UK, US, and Australia. Alongside writing for children, Martin writes crime fiction (as Ed Chatterton), continues to work as a graphic designer, and is currently working on his PhD. After time spent in the US, Martin now divides his time between Australia and the UK.

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Version 1.0
Middle School: Going Bush
9780143781226

First published by Random House Australia in 2016

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Illustrations by Martin Chatterton, 2016

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A Random House book
Published by Penguin Random House Australia Pty Ltd
Level 3, 100 Pacific Highway, North Sydney NSW 2060
www.randomhouse.com.au

Addresses for the Penguin Random House group of companies can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com/offices.

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Creator: Patterson, James, 1947—
Title: Middle School: Going Bush/James Patterson, Martin Chatterton.
ISBN: 9780143781226 (ebook)
Series: Middle School; 9
Target Audience: For primary school age.
Subjects: Middle schools—Juvenile fiction.
Adventure travel—Juvenile fiction.
Adventure stories, Australian.
Other Creators/Contributors: Chatterton, Martin, author.
Dewey Number: 813.54

Cover illustration by Martin Chatterton
Cover design by Christabella Designs

The publisher would like to thank Rachel Bin Salleh from Magabala Books.

* Fictional character.

** Does not exist.

* I have never actually been to East Texas and apologize to any East Texans reading this book. For all I know, East Texas is crammed with all kinds of exciting stuff.

* To be honest, I had no idea what kind of tree it was. “Coolabah” just sounded right. So sue me.